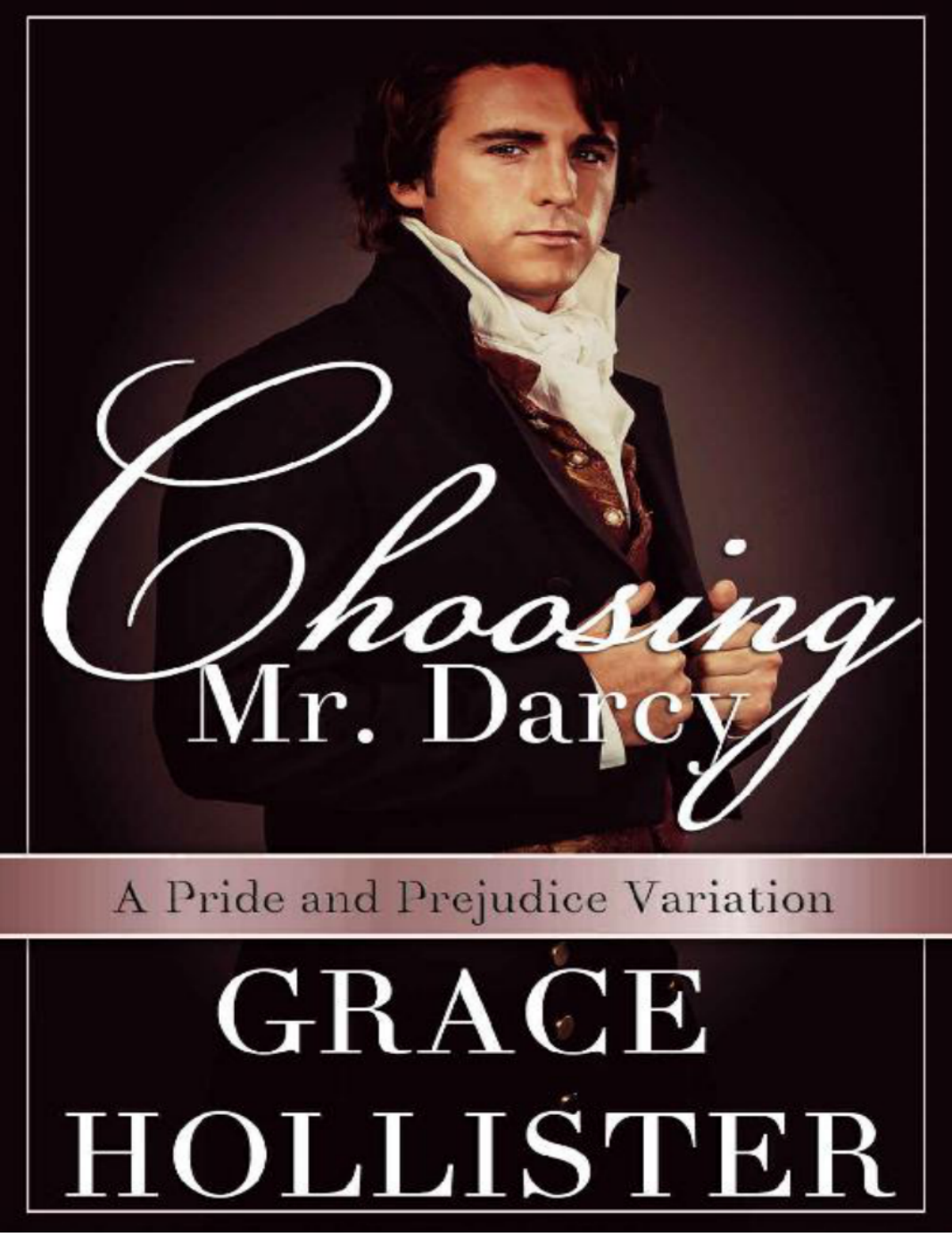


A Pride and Prejudice Variation

GRACE HOLLISTER

Choosing Mr. Darcy

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Grace Hollister



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Chapter 1

Elizabeth laced up her boots, looking forward to her morning stroll around the grounds of the estate. It was a great way to calm her nerves, especially after the difficult year the Bennet family had endured.

Before she could leave the room, Mrs. Robins, the housekeeper, knocked on the door.

"Miss Bennet," she said, "you have a visitor. It's Miss Charlotte Lucas."

"Charlotte," Elizabeth whispered to herself. "Thank you for letting me know. I shall be with her in a moment."

When Mrs. Robins left, Elizabeth lowered herself onto the bed, uncomfortable about having company. Visitors always brought questions she did not wish to answer.

But Charlotte was her good friend and they had not seen each other in a while. Drawing in a deep breath for courage, she rose to her feet.

She found Charlotte speaking with Lydia and Mary in the parlor. When Charlotte saw Elizabeth, she rushed to her. It had been at least a month since they had seen each other.

"Lizzie. I'm awfully happy to see you." The two women embraced until Elizabeth pulled away.

"Charlotte," she said, "would you like to keep me company during my walk?"

"I would love to."

When they walked past Mrs. Bennet in the corridor, Elizabeth informed her that they would not be long and that she would return soon to keep Mr. Bennet company.

Mrs. Bennet said not a word as she watched them leave the house. Mr. Bennet had not been well for quite some time, and the only one of her children who seemed to offer him much comfort was Elizabeth.

As much as Elizabeth loved her father, she often found herself missing the days when she was able to leave the house for an extended period of time without worrying that his condition might worsen, or that she will return to find that he was no more.

As Elizabeth and Charlotte walked side-by-side along the small path that led to the pond, neither said a word to the other.

It was only once they had reached the pond that Charlotte turned to Elizabeth with a concerned expression on her face. “I must apologize for not coming to see you for quite some time. The past weeks must have been extremely challenging for you.”

Elizabeth placed a hand on Charlotte’s arm. “There is no need for you to apologize, Charlotte. You were away in Scotland. And I hope you had an exciting time with your cousin.”

“I certainly did, but as my dear friend, I thought of you often.” Charlotte dropped her gaze. When she looked back into Elizabeth’s eyes, hers were clouded by sadness. “I hate that your father was a victim of the Martin Harris schemes.”

“Not only my father, I’m afraid. Quite a lot of families have been impacted by that imposter.”

Martin Harris was a man the town of Hertfordshire would forever remember. He was the man who had come to town a year ago, flaunting his great wealth. He had claimed to be a financial expert and offered several households the opportunity to increase their fortunes.

The man had seemed so trustworthy and agreeable, that even the sensible Mr. Bennet had fallen for his schemes. In fact, they had formed a friendship, with Harris even dining with the Bennet family from time to time. When it was finally revealed that Martin Harris was a con artist with barely a penny to his name, it was too late, and he had already left Hertfordshire never to be seen again.

Mr. Bennet had not only lost a friend, but also most of his fortune. To make matters worse, his health had also been impacted by the betrayal.

“I do hope your father is on the mend. I did not have the opportunity to greet him. Your mother said he was resting.”

“Unfortunately, his health continues to deteriorate. His heart has never quite recovered. The whole financial disaster took quite a toll on him.”

“I’m terribly sorry to hear that, Lizzie. I hope things will improve soon.”

“So do I.” Elizabeth peered at the distant stables, wondering what the future would bring. She was not only concerned about her father’s health, she worried about their home. Most of their horses had already been sold and several servants had been relieved of their positions.

She turned back to Charlotte. “I apologize, Charlotte, but would you mind if we return to the house already? My father might be asking for me.”

“Not at all.” Charlotte ran a hand up and down her bare arm. “It’s a shame you cannot leave him for long. I was actually heading to

Meryton and I was hoping you would join me."

Elizabeth's heart sank. "I would have loved to, but I have to let you down. I hope you understand."

"Absolutely." Charlotte squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "There will be other times."

Charlotte barely visited Meryton without purchasing several items for herself, and there were times she forgot that Elizabeth was no longer able to shop for goods she had no need for. It was one major reason that Lizzie had rejected her invitation.

The change in the Bennet family's financial situation had mostly affected the younger Bennet girls, especially Lydia, who had always been an impulsive buyer. Since they had been brought up quite comfortably, it would certainly take some time for the girls to adjust to their new reality.

Back in front of the house, Elizabeth bid farewell to Charlotte and watched her enter the carriage. When she finally went back inside, she found the entire family gathered inside the drawing room. Jane read a book and Kitty, Mary, and Lydia played a game as Mr. Bennet sat on the sofa, the quilt Elizabeth had made him draped across his legs.

An ache spread like wildfire through Elizabeth's chest as she watched her beloved Papa staring into space, something he did for most of the day. The man who had been so full of life, now spent each day waiting for it to end. He barely ate and he hardly slept at night as he was haunted by fears about the future and regrets about the past.

He was disappearing every day and they were unable to stop it.

Elizabeth walked up to him and tucked the quilt under his legs. "Good morning, Papa." She kissed his cheek. "How are you feeling today?"

"Very well," Mr. Bennet said in a low, broken voice. He did not even turn to look at her.

Elizabeth lowered herself next to her father and leaned close enough for him to hear her words. "We shall get through this, Papa. You will recover."

Elizabeth chose to remain positive, to believe that both their financial situation and their father's health would improve.

Mr. Bennet nodded without saying a word. He did not share his daughter's optimism.

Elizabeth was content to just sit next to him, while Mrs. Bennet sat in a chair by the window, glancing at them from time to time.

Not long after, Elizabeth heard her father's labored breathing and knew that at any second now he would fall asleep. Sleep, when it welcomed him, was the only thing that offered him a chance to forget what had happened.

She glanced at her mother, who had also become very quiet in the

past months. It was no secret that Mrs. Bennet missed her old life of being invited to dine and dance among people of high birth, and hosting dinners and parties in their home. While her friend Lady Lucas was able to continue living her normal lifestyle, as they had not been affected by Martin Harris's schemes, Mrs. Bennet had to be careful about how she spent the little money they had left.

Elizabeth wondered how long it would be until there was nothing left and they were forced to move out of their beloved home.

"Are you all right, Mama?" she asked, standing up. "You look rather pale."

Mrs. Bennet shook her head. "You should not concern yourself with me, Lizzie. You should have accompanied Charlotte to Meryton. She had come here to ask you to join her."

"I would like to go to Meryton," Lydia said suddenly.

Mrs. Bennet shot her a look. "Not you, Lydia. We have no money for you to spend on unnecessary things. But Lizzie should have gone."

"Charlotte invited me," Elizabeth said, "but I much prefer to remain home with Papa."

"You should be out there making yourself available to potential suitors. Now more than ever, it's important for you each to find husbands," Mrs. Bennet said, now speaking to all of her daughters.

As their finances worsened, Mrs. Bennet became even more desperate to marry off her daughters to wealthy, available men. To her disappointment, both Elizabeth and Jane, in spite of their dire circumstances, refused to marry a man simply because of his financial standing. Although they believed it would better their situation, they preferred to marry for love. Elizabeth hoped she would meet a man who was both wealthy and in love with her, and she with him. She was not ready to betray her heart.

"I do not wish to go anywhere, Mama." Elizabeth's gaze fell on the envelope in Mrs. Bennet's hand. "Is that the letter that arrived at breakfast? You still have not opened it?"

Mrs. Bennet looked down at the envelope. "It's addressed to your father."

"You should open it, Mama," Jane said. "Papa gave his permission. What if it holds good news?"

Each time a letter arrived at the house, the sisters hoped it was written by a kind benefactor they had not known about, to rescue them from their predicament. Unfortunately, the majority of the letters were instead sent by debt collectors.

It was, therefore, no surprise that Mrs. Bennet was hesitant to open the one that had arrived that morning.

"I shall read it, if you like." Elizabeth reached out to her.

Mrs. Bennet's hand trembled as she handed over the letter.

“What does it say?” Kitty asked impatiently before Elizabeth even managed to open the envelope.

“It’s from Papa’s friend, Doctor Peter Booth.” Elizabeth brought the letter closer to her face. “He is a medic from Manchester.”

Everyone except Mr. Bennet straightened up in their seats. The air in the room crackled with anticipation.

Elizabeth started to read in silence.

“Read it out loud,” Mary urged, shifting in her seat. “What does Doctor *Booth* say? Is it pleasant news?”

“All right then.” Elizabeth cleared her throat and read to them.

Dear Mr. Bennet,

I was deeply grieved to hear of your troubles and the impact they have had on your health. I may not be in the position to rescue you financially, but I would like to seize the opportunity to offer my medical expertise.

To that end, I would like to invite you to come and stay with us for a time. That would enable me to see to your health myself. Should you agree to accept this invitation, Mrs. Booth and I would be pleased to welcome you at any time, even without prior notice. If you do choose to notify me, I would be happy to arrange for your transportation.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards,

Peter Booth

ELIZABETH STOPPED READING and glanced at her father, who showed no reaction to the news. Guilt gnawed at her as she lowered herself to sit next to him.

“How did he learn of our situation?” Mrs. Bennet asked, her hand pressed to her chest. “Mr. Bennet had lost contact with him.”

“People talk far and wide.” Elizabeth folded the letter carefully, averting her gaze so her mother did not suspect that she was the one responsible for contacting Doctor Booth.

Elizabeth had felt the need to do so as months had gone by and Mr. Bennet showed no interest in asking anyone for help, perhaps out of pride. She had hoped Doctor Booth might be able to help in the matter of her father’s health, but since the two men had been out of touch for quite some time, she had not expected much in return.

“What does it all mean?” Lydia rubbed her hands together in glee.

“Have you no ears?” Kitty replied. “He wishes for Papa to leave us.”

“It would not be for long,” Elizabeth said, her eyes on Mr. Bennet. Although he had knitted his brow, nothing else in his demeanor had changed. “It might do him good to be under the care of a proper medic, one who cares about his wellbeing. It is a kind offer.”

Elizabeth dreaded the idea of not having their father with them, but his full recovery was of utmost importance to her and it would be impolite for them to reject such a kindhearted offer.

“I shall not bear it if Mr. Bennet were to leave this house,” Mrs. Bennet cried.

“And what if his departure meant he would return to us in perfect health?” Elizabeth pressed.

Mrs. Bennet pursed her lips and said nothing.

Elizabeth resisted the urge to remind her mother and sisters that Mr. Bennet’s condition was deteriorating by the day, and he lacked the energy to do even the simplest of tasks. She would rather he left them for a few days or weeks than for a lifetime.

“I shall not bear it.” Mrs. Bennet stood and left the room, her skirts swishing around her legs as she walked.

The sisters continued to discuss the contents of the letter without Mr. Bennet’s contribution. It was almost as though he were not present in the room at all.

Jane agreed with Elizabeth and the younger Bennet sisters simply nodded when they were asked their opinions.

When Elizabeth asked Mr. Bennet whether he was willing to join his friend in Manchester, he said nothing. Then, just as she was about to give up hope, he gave a brief nod.

“Well then, I shall speak to Mama.” Elizabeth rose to her feet and went on the search for Mrs. Bennet. She found her in the sitting room, staring at a bouquet of roses.

“Mama, Doctor Booth is one of the best doctors in Manchester. He might be able to cure Papa. Papa agreed to go.”

Mrs. Bennet inhaled sharply. “If Mr. Bennet is going, so will I. I will not allow him to go alone.” With that, she stood and left the room to tell Mr. Bennet what she told Elizabeth. To their surprise, Mr. Bennet turned to her, pinning his tired eyes to her face. Then he said more words than he had in weeks.

“I shall go alone.” His voice was surprisingly firm. “You should remain here with the girls.” His gaze drifted to where Lydia and Kitty sat.

Mrs. Bennet fought him, but when Mr. Bennet refused to change his mind, she gave in.

A week later, Mr. Bennet left for Manchester without knowing when he would return. The day he left, the Bennet girls fussed over their mother, who was grieving as though Mr. Bennet had died.

Elizabeth held on to the hope that their father would return to them in perfect health.

Chapter 2

Two weeks after Mr. Bennet left for Manchester, Lady Lucas paid the Bennets a visit.

Elizabeth wondered why she had not called more often upon Mrs. Bennet, who was supposed to be her good friend. When Lady Lucas had fallen ill a few years ago, Mrs. Bennet had visited her several days a week.

When Elizabeth walked into the dining room, she found Lady Lucas speaking excitedly to her mother, while her sisters flipped through a copy of *La Belle Assemblée*, as though they had money to spare for fashionable clothing.

"Good morning, Lizzie," Mrs. Bennet said. "Lady Lucas is joining us for breakfast. She has some exciting news to share with us."

"We can hardly wait to hear it," said Kitty, clapping her hands together in excitement.

"Good morning, Lady Lucas. What a pleasant surprise," Elizabeth said, lowering herself into a chair.

While the servants poured the tea and chocolate, Lady Lucas leaned forward, her eyes dancing with excitement. "I shall no longer keep you in suspense." She leaned forward in her seat. "I came to tell you that Netherfield Park has finally been let."

"By whom?" Jane asked, lowering her cup of tea onto her saucer.

"By a wealthy single man by the name of Mr. Charles Bingley."

"Is he handsome?" Lydia and Kitty asked in unison.

"We had the pleasure of calling on him and his looks are quite enchanting." Lady Lucas took a sip of tea. "I can hardly wait to introduce him to Charlotte."

"How fortunate of you to have met him," Mrs. Bennet said with tortured restraint.

"Very fortunate indeed. But you shall also meet him soon." Lady Lucas lowered her cup. "Mr. Bingley will be hosting a spring ball at Netherfield Park and we have been invited to attend. He requested that we extend the invitation to some of our friends." She looked at the Bennet girls. "After everything that has happened, I thought maybe you girls could use a bit of excitement, and perhaps you might

catch the eye of one of the eligible bachelors at the ball. I'm certain there will be plenty as handsome and wealthy as Mr. Bingley."

Elizabeth read between the lines. Lady Lucas was making it clear that Mr. Bingley was off-limits and they should set their focus on other gentlemen.

"How kind of you to invite us, Lady Lucas." Mrs. Bennet's face lit up for the first time in weeks. Elizabeth was glad to see her in high spirits after she had spent so much time worrying about how Mr. Bennet was faring in Manchester. "We gladly accept the invitation."

"Although I do appreciate the invitation, Lady Lucas, I would rather not attend." Elizabeth dreaded that the ball would be the perfect opportunity for her mother to push her into the arms of any man showing even the slightest interest in her. After her father's departure, she had been feeling quite unlike herself. The last thing she felt like doing was socializing and dancing with men she did not feel attracted to.

"Elizabeth Bennet," her mother chided, fixing her with a hard glare. "How could you refuse such an invitation? You do not know when next we will be invited to such good company! You will all go, and that's that."

Elizabeth sighed inwardly. "Very well, mother. You're right. I shall attend." Although she did not feel like dancing, perhaps it would be a welcome distraction for all of them. She did not have to go to the ball with the task of returning with a future husband.

Her sisters squealed with delight. The younger Bennet sisters launched into a discussion about whether the handsome soldiers they heard were based in Meryton would be present at the ball.

"I did hear that the war hero, Mr. Wickham, is invited to attend," Lady Lucas said with a conspiring grin. "But you should be careful. I have also heard rumors that he is quite the rake."

"I have certainly heard of his reputation," Jane said softly. "When last I visited Meryton, I heard his name on most everyone's lips."

"What they say does not have to be the truth," Lydia turned to Jane. "To me he seemed like the perfect gentleman."

"You have met him?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

"I certainly have. He is the most handsome man I have ever come across."

Mrs. Bennet wagged a finger. "Stay away from him, Lydia. I have heard terrible things about the man. You must all be careful. My daughters shall only marry respectable gentlemen."

After Lady Lucas left, Elizabeth and Jane went to their room, and their conversation soon turned to Mr. Bennet's health.

"Do you believe he's on the mend?" Jane asked, worry wrinkling her brow.

“I hope so.” Elizabeth leaned back against the pillows. “But it does worry me that we have not yet received any word of it.”

Mrs. Bennet had received a telegram from their father, but he had simply informed her of his safe arrival and nothing more that could give them hope.

Jane let out a breath. “I suppose no news is better than bad news, do you not think?”

“I suppose so.” Elizabeth massaged her temples to relieve the tension. Jane was right. She would much rather hear nothing than receive news that her father’s condition had worsened.

Before the discussion could go on, the door opened and Mrs. Bennet filled the doorway, her arms crossed. “Girls, why do you retreat here discussing things of no importance?”

“What else would you have us do, Mama?” Elizabeth asked. She would not tell her mother that they had been talking about their father.

“We have a ball to attend in a week. You two should be in Meryton shopping for dresses.”

“Mother,” Elizabeth said. “We have plenty of dresses already. We do not need to buy more.”

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes widened with horror. “You shall not wear old garments to one of the year’s most exclusive balls. What would people say?”

“I believe they would be more concerned about enjoying the festivities rather than focusing on our choice of dress.” What Elizabeth really wanted to say was that most people in the village were already aware of their circumstances, and even if the Bennet sisters wore new dresses they could not hide from the truth.

“Do not be foolish, Elizabeth. We have not attended a ball or a dance in months. Everyone’s eyes will be on us.”

“Mama, we should not concern ourselves with that. We should spend the little money we have left on the upkeep of the house rather than squandering it on dresses.”

Mrs. Bennet’s face clouded and her lips parted, but no words came out. Soon she spun on her heel and walked away.

“Oh, Jane.” Elizabeth shut her eyes. “Should our finances not improve, it troubles me that mother might never be able to adjust to our new situation.”

“Do not worry yourself, Lizzie. If things worsen, she would have no choice but to do just that.”

Elizabeth buried her head in her hands. “We already have so little left. What would become of us if we were to lose it all?”

Before Mr. Bennet left for Manchester, he had secretly confessed to Elizabeth that the remaining money would not get them through a

year and there was a real danger of them losing their home. He begged her not to reveal the information to her sisters.

"I wish I knew, Lizzie," Jane said. "I wish I knew."

Elizabeth knew quite a number of families in the village who had lost their entire fortunes to Martin Harris. Some not only lost their homes as a result, they were forced to work as servants in affluent households in order to survive.

Elizabeth raised her head to meet Jane's gaze. "If we lose everything, I shall not feel ashamed to go out in search of employment. I do not believe it's beneath us to work."

"And what kind of work would you see yourself doing?" Jane wrapped her arms around her body as though to protect herself from Elizabeth's response.

"Perhaps the position of a governess or housekeeper, or even a lady's maid." Elizabeth was well aware that she was unqualified for all of those positions.

Jane reached out to touch her arm. "Let us hope it does not come to that."

"Hope is all we can do, but one never knows what the future holds. There is always a possibility that circumstances could worsen."

Would she really be able to work in someone else's home? One thing was for sure, she would do whatever it took in order to help her family, except to marry a man she did not love. Of course, if she were to meet a man who offered more than his wealth, she would consider herself to be quite lucky.

"Lizzie, I think it's best for us not to speak of things getting worse." Jane started brushing her hair.

Elizabeth was always in awe of her sister's beauty. She believed Jane to be more attractive than herself, but it did not pain her in any way. She only wished that Jane would be able to find a suitable husband, someone who would appreciate both her beauty and kind heart.

"Jane, promise me one thing," she said.

Jane put down her brush. "Of course, my dear Lizzie."

"Promise me that you will marry a man who will give you more than just a fortune. Happiness can only be found in a loving marriage."

"I give you my word." Jane shook her head. "Having grown up with you, my dear sister, I have become quite the romantic. I shall not marry a man who does not capture my heart."

"I'm relieved to hear that." Elizabeth smiled. "But be prepared for Mama. She is determined to marry us off to anyone who shows interest."

"I do understand her haste, given our situation," Jane said, taking

the hairbrush up again.

"I do too. I just hope that desperation does not repel the best matches for us."

~

ELIZABETH AND JANE spent the rest of the day at the house while Lydia, Kitty, and Mary went to Meryton with Mrs. Bennet. When they returned, they showed off the new garments that they planned to wear to the ball.

Elizabeth could not help but feel disappointed that after their discussion earlier, Mrs. Bennet still went shopping.

While Mrs. Bennet was speaking to Mrs. Robins, the housekeeper, Elizabeth pulled her sisters aside. "I do not understand why you purchased new dresses. You already have plenty of dresses and some of them are still unworn. We do not have the money to spend on things we do not need."

"Do not be so dull, Lizzie." Lydia glared at her. "We are not paupers. Mama promised that when Papa returns, everything will be as it used to be."

Elizabeth could do nothing to make her younger sisters see reason. During her walk later that evening, she still felt disappointed in them all.

Although she hoped for the best, she feared for the worst.

Chapter 3

When the carriage arrived at Netherfield Park, Elizabeth found herself glad she had come. The splendor of the estate made her appreciate the change of scenery. A night of dancing would be good for them all, especially her mother, who had visibly cheered up as the day of the spring ball grew closer.

"I expect all of you to be at your best behavior," Mrs. Bennet said before they exited the carriage. "We should make a good impression."

"Do not worry, Mama." Elizabeth placed a hand on her mother's. "We shall do our best to meet your expectations."

Mrs. Bennet inhaled deeply and glanced out of the window at the other guests who were arriving, then turned back to face them. "Lizzie and Jane, you should make the most of this evening. There will be plenty of single men with great fortunes. Such an opportunity might never come again. Do not allow your romantic notions to stand in the way of a good match."

Elizabeth and Jane exchanged a glance and said not a word. Reminding their mother that they would only marry for love would only annoy her, especially now that she was desperate for them to create better lives for themselves.

The balmy, rose-scented evening air caressed Elizabeth's skin and swept through her hair as she exited the carriage. She followed her mother and sisters into the building, feeling quite excited for the first time in a long while.

Upon entering the ballroom, her chest tightened. The other guests were dressed in clothing that far rivaled their own. Even though Kitty, Lydia, and Mary had purchased new dresses for the ball, nothing could compare to the garments of the other women in the room.

Elizabeth had never been one to care much about the latest fashions, but she conceded that she felt out of place in the gray dress she had purchased two years before.

Worse still was that Mrs. Bennet also noticed, and as she leaned in, Elizabeth knew she was about to get a tongue lashing. "You should have listened," she said between clenched teeth. "You should have purchased a gown fit for a celebration such as this."

“Mama, any gown we could afford would not compare to what is on display in this room.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Bennet said, forcing a smile so the outside world did not see her displeasure. “We may have suffered a great loss in fortune, but we are far from being paupers.”

“There’s Mr. Wickham,” Lydia interrupted, standing on her toes to get a better look of the man she had not been able to stop talking about. “I shall introduce myself to him tonight.”

“Please be careful,” Elizabeth said, her stomach churning with anxiety at the thought that her sister would want to get involved with a man like Mr. Wickham.

I’m very capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much.” Before Elizabeth or Mrs. Bennet could say another word, Lydia pushed herself through the crowd.

“That girl will embarrass us all,” Mrs. Bennet said. “It is not appropriate for a lady to introduce herself to a gentleman.”

Elizabeth wished Mrs. Bennet would follow Lydia rather than continue to stand and chastise her outfit, but her mother stayed. Elizabeth was sure she would remain all evening to ensure she and Jane mingled with her choice of potential husbands.

Not long after Lydia left, Kitty and Mary excused themselves to search for refreshments.

“You’re slouching, Jane,” Mrs. Bennet said, her lips pursed.

Elizabeth and Jane stifled their laughter. Their mother’s anxiety was starting to show.

“Lady Lucas is over there.” Mrs. Bennet’s face brightened. “Follow me, girls. I will ask her to introduce you to Mr. Bingley.”

Elizabeth and Jane followed obediently. It was best to get the introductions out of the way so they could begin to enjoy themselves.

When they found Lady Lucas, she was already conversing with the man known to be Mr. Bingley. He had a kind smile and warm eyes. Next to him stood another man whose demeanor was rather stiff and unfriendly in comparison. His lips looked as though they had never been touched by a smile.

Mrs. Bennet cleared her throat in an attempt to get lady Lucas’s attention, but Lady Lucas was occupied with introducing Charlotte and Mr. Bingley and she would not allow herself to be disturbed.

It was only when Mr. Bingley peered over her shoulder to look at the Bennet girls that she turned around.

“Lizzie,” Charlotte said with a smile, “I’m so delighted that you could come.”

“So am I.” Elizabeth hugged Charlotte.

After a moment’s hesitation, Lady Lucas finally made the introductions. “Mr. Bingley, this is Mrs. Bennet and her daughters. I

had asked them to join us this evening."

Although Lady Lucas's voice gave nothing away, Elizabeth was able to tell that she was quite annoyed by the disturbance and had wished for Mr. Bingley's focus to be on Charlotte alone.

"We are very honored to attend," Mrs. Bennet said, then turned immediately to Jane. "This is my eldest daughter, Jane." She did not bother to hide the fact that Jane was her favorite daughter, and the one she considered to be more beautiful than all of them. But Elizabeth loved her sister too much to mind.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Jane." Mr. Bingley focused on Jane's face. His expression warmed even more. He did not look away until Lady Lucas made an unintelligible sound.

Mr. Bingley reluctantly glanced at the man next to him.

"This is my very good friend, Mr. Darcy. He will be my guest at Netherfield for a number of weeks."

Mr. Darcy extended his hand and mumbled a greeting that Elizabeth felt to be aloof. She had never met a more disagreeable man in all her life.

Once the introductions were made, Lady Lucas tried to get Charlotte to remain by Mr. Bingley's side in hopes he would ask her for a dance. She nudged her daughter in what she must have thought was a discreet manner, but Elizabeth was able to see it all.

Unfortunately, Mr. Bingley only had eyes for Jane, and when he extended his hand to her, Lady Lucas's face visibly crumpled. "Miss Bennet, may I have the honor of the first dance?"

"Of course," Mrs. Bennet said and then immediately covered her lips with the tips of her fingers, her cheeks coloring. "I mean Jane would be honored to dance with you, Mr. Bingley."

Jane laughed and took his hand. "My mother is right. I would be honored."

Mr. Bingley ushered Jane toward the dance floor, leaving behind a tense atmosphere. While Mrs. Bennet watched Jane and Mr. Bingley dance a minuet, Lady Lucas turned to Charlotte with a tight smile.

"Charlotte, my dear, I would like to have a word," she said.

"Of course, Mama." Charlotte turned to Elizabeth, "We shall speak later." She did not seem to be at all disappointed that Mr. Bingley was dancing with Jane. It pained her mother more than it did her.

"This promises to be a most enjoyable evening," Mrs. Bennet said when the Lucases had walked away.

"I agree." Elizabeth warmed at the sight of Mr. Bingley sweeping Jane across the dance floor. "Mr. Bingley is quite the dancer, isn't he?"

"Indeed. And when he caught sight of my beautiful Jane, he chose her to have the first dance." Mrs. Bennet clasped her hands under her chin. "He would make the perfect match for her. And should they end

up marrying, our financial troubles would be no more."

As Mrs. Bennet spoke, Elizabeth felt the hairs at the back of her neck bristle. She turned around and her eyes met those of Mr. Darcy, the man who never smiled. Warmth flooded her cheeks when it dawned on her that he must have heard their conversation.

"I hope you're enjoying the ball," Elizabeth said, attempting to distract him from any unpleasant thoughts he had concerning them.

His face twisted in what others might call a smile, but Elizabeth was able to see right through him. He was mocking her.

She gave him a slight nod, then turned to her mother, placing a hand on her arm. "I should go and look for Lydia," she said.

Mrs. Bennet barely acknowledged her as she continued to watch Jane dancing with the most eligible bachelor in the hall. In a way, Elizabeth was glad that her mother was so distracted. It meant she would not pressure her to converse or dance with men like Mr. Darcy, who acted as though they were superior to others.

Neither Lydia nor Mr. Wickham were anywhere to be seen.

Elizabeth was just making her way back to where she had left Mrs. Bennet, when she walked past a group of women and overheard their conversation.

"There are rumors that Mr. Bennet has run off to Manchester," one of the women said.

"I heard he died over there. He was ill for a long time. Something to do with his weak heart," another added.

Elizabeth continued to walk, pretending she had not heard a word. But her celebratory mood had soured. After hearing what was said about her father, the last place she wanted to be was at Netherfield, surrounded by people who spread false gossip.

It annoyed Elizabeth that the room was so filled with people that she was unable to locate her mother. She had not remained where Elizabeth had left her, so she stayed in one place until Jane had finished dancing with Mr. Bingley and came to join her. With one glance, it was apparent to Elizabeth that Mr. Bingley had left his mark on Jane's heart.

"He is the most handsome man I have ever met," Jane whispered to Elizabeth. "I feel so lucky to have danced with him. He promised me another dance before the night is over."

"I am so happy for you, Jane." Elizabeth hooked her arm through her sister's elbow. "He is just as lucky as you are. You're the most beautiful woman in this place."

"Just as beautiful as you are, my darling sister."

"That's kind of you to say, but we all know you are the most beautiful of us all and I do not begrudge you your good looks in any way." Elizabeth smiled, but her face grew serious almost immediately

when her mind recalled the words she had heard earlier. “I overheard some of the guests talking about Papa, saying he has run away. Some claim he died in Manchester.”

“That is just awful.” Jane placed a hand on her chest. “Who would say such a thing?”

“People we do not even know.” Elizabeth felt heat flush through her body when she recalled what was said. “What this means is that we have to find out how Papa is doing. I cannot bear to hear people speak of him that way.”

“I agree. We must speak with Mama.”

Elizabeth and Jane searched the room for their other sisters. Only Kitty and Mary could be found. Their mother and Lydia were still nowhere to be seen.

“Where in the world could she be?” Elizabeth peered through the crowd.

“She mentioned earlier that she was going for a stroll in the gardens with Mr. Wickham,” Kitty said.

“At this hour?” Elizabeth’s heart started to beat faster. “It’s dark out there. What if he takes advantage of her?”

She was just about to go on the search for Lydia in the gardens, when she spotted her and Mr. Wickham on the dance floor.

Her shoulders relaxed. “They’re dancing.”

“Perhaps she came to her senses,” Jane said. “Going for a walk alone with a man such as Mr. Wickham could have been dangerous for her reputation.”

“Once the dance is over, I will ask to speak to her.” Elizabeth pursed her lips. “Excuse me for a moment.”

It was only a matter of time before Mrs. Bennet appeared to urge Elizabeth to make herself known to the single men. She agreed, but first she needed a moment to collect herself.

As she moved away from the ball-goers, Elizabeth came close to where Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were talking. She hid behind a wall so they did not see her.

“Darcy, there are quite a number of beautiful ladies in here. You can have your pick,” she heard Mr. Bingley say over the sound of music, conversations, and laughter. “Why do you not ask one of the Bennet girls for a dance? Perhaps Jane’s sister Elizabeth?”

“I do not wish to be involved with the Bennet girls. I’ve been around here long enough to hear stories of their circumstances. Though their financial struggles warrant it, desperation is a quality I do not find attractive.”

“I have certainly heard the rumors,” Mr. Bingley replied. “The father’s loss of fortune must have been terrible.”

“I’m sure it was, Bingley, but I would hate to be the man that

rescues the Bennet family from financial ruin."

Elizabeth curled her hands to fists, forcing herself to remain where she was and not confront them. She could feel the rage coursing through her veins.

"But, Darcy," Bingley continued, "you cannot deny the Bennet sisters' beauty. Surely you see it."

"To be perfectly honest with you, no woman in this room is handsome enough to tempt me."

Elizabeth had heard enough. The man was just as disagreeable as she had thought. Her hand clutched her chest as she stumbled away, struggling to keep her composure.

She managed to give the appearance of calm for the rest of the evening, even accepting a few dances, but her spirits had plummeted. She did not repeat a word of the conversation to her mother or sisters.

Jane accepted another dance from Mr. Bingley, and Elizabeth was glad that Mr. Darcy's words had not affected his interest in her sister.

When the night finally came to an end and they left the ball, the only two sisters who were in high spirits were Jane and Lydia. Although Mrs. Bennet was not pleased that Elizabeth had not danced with any gentleman more than once, her joy over Jane and Mr. Bingley outweighed her disappointment.

When they reached the Longbourn house, Elizabeth decided to speak to her mother about the rumors she had overheard concerning Mr. Bennet.

"We need to know the state of his health," she said. "Perhaps you should go to Manchester to find out the truth."

"And leave you on your own? Who will keep an eye on Lydia?"

"We are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves, mother. And I promise to keep an eye on Lydia. I have a feeling Papa needs you more than we do."

Finally, Mrs. Bennet agreed to join Mr. Bennet in Manchester in order to ease all of their concerns.

She left three days later.

Chapter 4

Several days after Mrs. Bennet's departure, Elizabeth and her sisters spent a day in Meryton, seeking to raise their spirits. While her sisters visited the milliner's shop to admire the latest fashions, Elizabeth visited a coffee house attached to a small library.

As soon as she entered, she felt instantly uneasy. People stared and gossiped about her and her family loudly enough for the words to reach her ears.

"Those poor girls," someone said. "How long until they lose their home?"

"From what I keep hearing, it will not be much longer," said a woman with a pale face.

Elizabeth felt her chest tighten and the tears burn the backs of her eyes, but instead of paying them any attention, she lifted her chin, chose a book, and found a place to sit. She refused them permission to see her pain.

As hard as she tried to read the words in front of her, she was unable to focus. She had thought coming to Meryton would distract her from thinking about their troubles, but she had been wrong.

When Mrs. Bennet left, she privately spoke to Elizabeth and put her in charge of the family's affairs. Even though Jane was the eldest of the girls, Mrs. Bennet thought her too gentle to handle difficult situations. But at this moment, Elizabeth felt rather fragile herself. Being in charge was harder than she had expected.

"It would be difficult for them to find suitable husbands. What men would be willing to take on their financial troubles?" A woman at a nearby table spoke in a high-pitched voice that was loud enough for all to hear.

The words reached Elizabeth's heart and made her chest ache. They were similar to what Mr. Darcy had told Mr. Bingley. She had hoped Mr. Bingley would not take them to heart, and at first it did not seem so.

The week after the ball, he had called on Jane several times, and they were all in agreement that it was only a matter of time before he asked for her hand in marriage. Jane made no secret of the fact that

she was deeply in love with him and she would accept his offer at once. Mr. Bingley even invited her once to Netherfield Park to dine with him and his sisters, who were in town for several days. But ever since that dinner, a week ago, Jane had not heard a word from him.

Elizabeth feared that Mr. Darcy had spoken to him further, convincing him to stay away from the Bennet girls.

Unable to handle any more torture, Elizabeth put the book down, got to her feet and approached the woman who had just spoken. The woman's beady eyes widened and Elizabeth smiled at her.

"If we happen to be unlucky enough not to find suitable husbands, we will survive on our own. We are strong enough to care for ourselves." Her smile widened. "And I would let you know that what happened to our father's fortune could happen to that of any household. Who's to guarantee that you will be spared from some future disaster?" Before the woman could respond, Elizabeth pushed back her shoulders and stepped back from the table. Then she walked out of the library.

Her sisters were just leaving the milliner's shop when she found them. To her horror, she noticed that Lydia was carrying a package. Before they came to Meryton, Elizabeth had made it clear that no one was to purchase anything.

"Please tell me the package does not belong to you," Elizabeth said to Lydia. "I thought we agreed not to make any purchases."

"*You* decided that. We were not all in agreement." Lydia tightened her grip around her package and started to walk away.

Elizabeth hurried after her and reached for her arm. "Do you not understand? Our circumstances have changed. We are not in the position to be spending money the way we used to. At least not until Mama and Papa return."

"I shall not return it." Lydia snatched her arm from Elizabeth's grip. "And stop being so overly dramatic, Lizzie." Lydia glanced at a passing group of people, who were now staring at them. "Do not embarrass me this way."

"Lizzie is right, Lydia," Jane said, joining them. "We should be cautious with our spending as long as we do not know what the future holds."

"You're both being ridiculous. We have enough money. We still have the house and the servants and everything else we need to survive."

"But for how long?" Elizabeth asked, tilting her head to the side. She lowered her voice. "There are no guarantees that we would recover from this. We cannot afford to spend beyond our means. And we can certainly not afford to buy things we do not need."

"I purchased a bonnet because I need a new one. And I spent the

money I had in my own purse."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment, giving her heart time to settle. Kitty and Mary leaned into each other as though they were partaking in a private discussion. Elizabeth was glad that they at least were not giving her and Jane a hard time.

She addressed Lydia with a weary tone. "Whatever money any one of us has in our possessions belongs to all of us."

"I shall not return it, and that's that." Lydia stormed away, and this time Elizabeth did not follow.

~

AS THEY WALKED BACK to the house, Jane and Elizabeth's younger sisters lagged behind, giggling about something.

"I hope Mama will return soon," Elizabeth said with a heavy heart. "Lydia is becoming unmanageable. I'm not sure we will be able to harness her much longer." She was even more troubled because she had heard rumors that Lydia was secretly meeting with Mr. Wickham.

Jane put her hand through her sister's arm. "I hope so too. And I cannot bear to think of what would happen if Papa-–"

"It shall not come to that. We cannot allow ourselves such gloomy thoughts."

"I only wish mother would write to inform us of his condition."

Elizabeth shared the same fears as Jane, but she worried that if she voiced them, they would materialize. It certainly troubled her that Mrs. Bennet had not written apart from a letter to let them know she had arrived, just as Papa had done when he had left for Manchester. Could it be that she found him in a much worse state than imagined and did not wish to worry them?

"I'm sure she's merely occupied with caring for him. We should remain hopeful." She squeezed Jane's hand.

She was still hopeful when they reached the house, but her spirits fell when one of the maids informed them that she was leaving her position. Apparently, she was afraid that it was only a matter of time before the Bennets were not able to afford to pay her wages. As a result, she had found employment elsewhere.

It was even more devastating when, right on her heels, the cook also revealed she had the same fears and would leave as well.

Elizabeth and Jane pleaded with them, but they refused to be swayed. In the end, the sisters had no choice but to allow them to leave.

"Perhaps it is not such a misfortune," Elizabeth said to Jane as they watched the maids go. "We have fewer workers to pay now. We still have Mrs. Robins. And we still have the gardener and two stable boys,

if they do not decide to leave us as well."

"You're right," Jane said in a broken whisper.

"And if need be, we could always take over some of the tasks in the house in order to assist Mrs. Robins." Elizabeth chuckled. "But I do feel that our dear sisters would not be willing to participate in anything that would involve maintaining the house."

Jane joined in the laughter. "Most certainly not."

Later that night, when they were preparing themselves for bed, Elizabeth noticed that Jane was awfully quiet. When she inquired what was on her mind, Jane acted as if it were nothing of importance, but Elizabeth knew her sister well and could see the pain on her face. She suspected it had something to do with Mr. Bingley. Jane gave in and admitted that Elizabeth was right.

"I wish he would call again. He had promised he would."

"I am so sorry, Jane." Elizabeth sank onto her bed. "Perhaps he is simply occupied. I *do* believe his feelings for you are genuine."

"I hope so. I care for him so deeply."

Elizabeth went to embrace Jane. "If he's not the one, someone better will come along. But I hope he is."

Soon, the sisters went to bed, but Elizabeth awoke in the middle of the night from a horrible dream.

When Jane asked her what it was about, she fell quiet for a while. "I cannot remember," she lied. She refused to tell her sister that she dreamed that their father had died. Jane was worried enough as it was.

As Elizabeth struggled to return to sleep, she could not help feeling guilty for insisting that Mr. Bennet go to Manchester. What if his condition worsened and he never got the chance to spend more time with them, or to say goodbye? As much as she hoped for Mrs. Bennet's return, she feared that she might be bringing terrible news with her.

Finally, Elizabeth fell back into a troubled sleep, terrified of what the morning would bring.

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AS IT TURNED OUT, the morning brought bad news for Jane.

Mr. Bingley had written her saying he was leaving Netherfield for several weeks. As though it were important for Jane to know, he mentioned that Mr. Darcy's estate was being rebuilt after a fire and he would be the new master of Netherfield Park until Mr. Bingley's return. He was unsure of when that would be. There was nothing at all in the letter to give Jane hope of any future together, and she was devastated. Nothing Elizabeth did or said could comfort her.

Elizabeth hated to admit it, but she was losing hope in their ever

being happy again. Jane and Mr. Bingley's courtship had been the light in their bleak future. Now that that little bit of hope was taken away, Elizabeth found herself fearing the worst.

Chapter 5

One morning, another week after Mrs. Bennet left for Manchester, Elizabeth woke up to the sound of a carriage approaching the house. It surprised both she and Jane as no one had called on them for days.

"Who could it possibly be?" Elizabeth jumped out of bed and dressed hastily. "Perhaps Mama and Papa have returned."

"Or perhaps it could be Mr. Bingley." Since her initial despair at receiving the letter from Mr. Bingley, Jane had adopted an earnest hope that he would one day return.

"We are about to find out," Elizabeth said, gathering her skirts and hurrying from the room with Jane close behind.

Kitty, Mary, and Lydia had also heard the carriage and were rushing to the front door. Elizabeth swung it open, excitement building inside her chest, but as soon as she saw the visitor emerging from the carriage, her heart froze.

It was neither their parents nor Mr. Bingley. Their visitor was Mr. Collins, a cousin of Mr. Bennet, and the man next in line to inherit the house should anything happen to Mr. Bennet.

The first thought that came to Elizabeth's mind was that Mr. Bennet had died and Mr. Collins had come to claim what was rightfully his. But she refused to believe it. She glared at him as he approached the house with a grin on his face. Watching him made her stomach turn.

Not long before the Martin Harris scheme had happened, Mr. Collins had visited them and asked for Elizabeth's hand in marriage. For a brief moment, Elizabeth had considered the possibility of becoming his wife, but her hopes were dashed when Mr. Collins, after having had too much to drink, had followed her to her bedroom and tried to force himself on her. Following that incident, Elizabeth promptly rejected his offer. Mrs. Bennet had demanded to know why, and Elizabeth told her the truth. She was hurt and disappointed when Mrs. Bennet refused to believe that a gentleman like Mr. Collins would do such a thing. She had demanded that Elizabeth not tell another soul about it.

She had hoped to never see him again, and yet here he was. Her cheeks burned with renewed anger.

"Miss Bennet," he said, nodding at each of the Bennet girls in turn.

The others looked just as surprised as she was.

"Mr. Collins," Elizabeth and Jane said at the same time.

"We had no knowledge that you would visit us," Elizabeth continued, hands clenched at her sides.

"I had wished to surprise you." A smirk formed on his lips.

Elizabeth felt uncomfortable that he chose to visit them when their parents were away.

"I'm afraid Mama and Papa are not here to welcome you," she said.

"I'm aware of that." He came to a halt a short distance from where Elizabeth stood. "It is you I have come to see, Miss Elizabeth."

Before Elizabeth could say another word, Mr. Collins walked past them and entered the house uninvited. If he had not done so, she would have thrown her manners out the window and refrained from inviting him in.

"It feels different here," he said. The way he stood, so sure of himself, made him look as though he had already claimed ownership.

"Mr. Collins," Elizabeth swallowed her fury, "do you not think it rather inappropriate to visit single ladies with no chaperone present? I do hope you understand that it's uncomfortable for us to be in the presence of a single man such as yourself."

"No worries." He chuckled. "I do not wish to stay for long. I had only wished to have a word with you, Miss Elizabeth. Alone if that is all right."

"I would feel more at ease if you said what you came to say in front of my sisters." Elizabeth paused. "Please follow us to the parlor."

"Very well," he said, his expression clouded as he followed them.

Once inside the room, Elizabeth turned to him. "What is it you wish to speak to me about?" It was best for him to get straight to the point. After his behavior last time, she wished to spend as little time with him as possible. She certainly would not allow him to be alone with any of her sisters.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said, holding his hat to his chest. "Given that your financial situation has drastically changed, I have come to offer you my assistance."

"And what form of assistance would that be?" Elizabeth asked, her stomach twisting with unease.

"I was grieved to hear of your father's illness and financial troubles. I am glad he is in Manchester for treatment, but I have heard that his condition has worsened." He shut his eyes and opened them again as though he were suffering. "Some even say that he has already

succumbed to his illness. I pray there is no truth to it."

Elizabeth crossed her arms. "People find pleasure in gossip. Surely as a member of the clergy you put no stock in idle speech?"

"Of course not." Mr. Collins straightened up, but even at his full height, Elizabeth towered over him. "But were there any truth to the rumors, and should Mr. Bennet be no more, I'm sure you already know that I would be the heir to this estate."

Elizabeth drew in a breath to calm her racing heart. "Mr. Collins, our father has not passed. It *is* true that he is quite ill, but he is undergoing treatment and he shall recover fully." She glanced at her sisters. Their expressions showed that they were just as shocked at what Mr. Collins had said.

"Do you happen to have any kind of proof that he is in fact still alive?"

Elizabeth tilted her chin defiantly. "Indeed, we have." She hoped Mr. Collins would not be able to see through her lie. "We have recently received a letter from our mother with the news that his health is improving by the day and they will soon be returning home."

"I see." Mr. Collins lowered himself into the nearest sofa. "I'm glad to hear it. However, even if he recovers, your financial situation might never improve, and even if it were to, the process would be slow."

"What is it you wish to say, Mr. Collins?" Jane asked.

"As a member of this family, I feel it is my responsibility to offer my help."

Elizabeth found it laughable that he would show up months after they lost their fortune, pretending to be concerned for their welfare.

"In what way do you wish to offer your assistance?" Elizabeth suspected she knew what Mr. Collins was about to say, but she wanted to hear it in his own words. While he spoke, she would take the opportunity to consider her response.

"As you might recall, when I last visited, I made you an offer, Miss Elizabeth." Mr. Collins rubbed his chin. "An offer you refused. Since then I hope you have had plenty of time to rethink the possibility of our union and have come to a conclusion that will be of mutual benefit."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I must disappoint you yet again, Mr. Collins. I have in no way changed my mind."

"Are you certain of that? You must be in desperate need of a husband, especially now. My offer to you would solve quite a number of your problems."

"I am not as desperate as you choose to believe." Elizabeth crossed the room to the window. She had no intention of becoming the wife of a man like Mr. Collins, someone who drank too much and disrespected women.

Even though Mr. Collins's expression was dark, his smirk stayed in place. "Can you afford to refuse me again? What other options do you have?"

"As I already mentioned, Mr. Collins. I do not wish to be your wife. I would appreciate you leaving the matter alone."

"What about me?" Lydia asked quickly.

Elizabeth looked at her in horror. "What about you?" she asked, eyes narrowed.

"I would be glad to offer you my hand in marriage," Lydia said to Mr. Collins, her hand outstretched. "That is of course, if you wish to extend your offer to me."

Elizabeth felt the blood drain from her face. "Lydia, you couldn't possibly mean that."

"I do." Lydia's eyes were fixed on Mr. Collins.

"As honored as I am, Miss Lydia," Mr. Collins said, laying a hand on his chest. "I do feel you're slightly too young for my taste."

"I disagree." Lydia dropped her hand. "Girls my age marry all the time."

"Mr. Collins is right," Elizabeth said in a stern voice. She wished for this discussion to end as soon as possible. She would not allow any of her sisters to marry Mr. Collins. "You're much too young for him, Lydia." She rushed to her and placed both hands on her shoulders, but Lydia shook her off.

"I'm much too young for everything," she said. "I do not seem to be any use to anyone in this house. In that case, perhaps it's best I leave."

Lydia left the parlor with everyone staring after her in shock.

Mr. Collins brought his focus back to Elizabeth. "For the next few days, I shall be staying at the inn in Meryton. That will give you time to think about my offer."

"Mr. Collins, you shall be wasting your time. I'm of the belief that a man and a woman should only enter into marriage if they are a perfect match."

"Very well." Mr. Collins got to his feet. "In that case, I shall take my leave." With that, he marched out of the room.

Elizabeth and her sisters followed him to the door and watched him enter into his carriage and drive off.

For the rest of the day, the sisters barely spoke to each other, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Mr. Collins had reminded them of the severity of their situation.

When Elizabeth went to bed, she was unable to sleep. Her heart felt heavy and she could not stop thinking about the exchange between her and Lydia in the parlor that day.

Early the next morning, she decided she would speak to Lydia

before breakfast, to make her understand why she was against her marrying Mr. Collins. She was prepared to tell her what Mr. Collins had done during his last visit. But when she went to the room Lydia shared with Kitty, she found a note on her bed. The words written on it were like daggers slicing through Elizabeth's heart.

I have gone to Manchester to join Mama and Papa. I am capable of making my own decisions.

Your sincerely,

Lydia

ELIZABETH SHOOK Kitty awake and asked her when Lydia had left. Kitty rubbed the sleep from her eyes and told Elizabeth that she had not heard her leave at all.

Devastated by Lydia's departure, the sisters spent the rest of the day, searching for her in Meryton. She was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 6

"You should return home with the others," Elizabeth said to Jane after several unsuccessful hours of searching for Lydia. "I will visit the Lucases to find out if they have seen her."

"What if she meant what she wrote in the note she left behind? What if she really went to Manchester?" Jane looked around her as though she thought Lydia might emerge from thin air. "If that is the case, we will not know unless we receive a letter from Mama and Papa to confirm it."

Elizabeth bent forward, her hands clutching her knees as she struggled to catch her breath. She could not bear the thought that their sister was on her own and possibly in danger. She felt she was failing in her responsibilities since she promised her mother that she would take care of everyone.

She straightened up again and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. "Lydia must still be in Hertfordshire. She did not have the money for transportation to Manchester."

"You may be right." Jane blew out a breath. "What shall we do now?"

Elizabeth glanced at the younger sisters, who looked just as lost as Jane and Elizabeth felt. "It's best you return home. I will continue to search for her. I will try to be home before dinner."

"All right then," Jane said. "I hope we find her before nightfall."

"So do I." Elizabeth did not even want to imagine what could happen if they failed to find Lydia.

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MRS. BENNET HAD ALWAYS TOLD her daughters to never call on anyone without prior notice, but as Elizabeth approached the Lucases's residence, she assured herself that this was an emergency. To her disappointment, she was told that the Lucases were attending a luncheon and were, therefore, not home. None of the servants had seen Lydia either.

Elizabeth returned home with a heavy heart and horrifying visions of what might have become of her sister racing through her mind. By the time she arrived home, she was exhausted, hungry, and near despair. But to her shock, when the door opened, it was Lydia who stood in the doorway.

Elizabeth rushed to her. “Lydia,” she said in a sharp voice, “where have you been?” Even in her anger, she was relieved to see her sister, whom she pulled into an embrace. “Why would you run off like that? We were terrified for you.”

“I did not mean to worry you,” Lydia said in a businesslike tone and pulled away. “I was tired of being told what to do. You have robbed me of the freedom to make my own choices.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank when she saw that her sister was not at all remorseful for what she had put them all through.

“Come inside. We need to have a word.” Elizabeth took Lydia’s hand and they went to the kitchen to join the others.

“She was already here when we arrived,” Jane said to Elizabeth. “She refuses to admit that what she did was not right.”

“Why are you making such a fuss?” Lydia sank into her chair. “I was away for only a few hours.”

“Lydia, you left us a note saying you are going to Manchester,” Jane retorted. “You planned to leave town.”

Lydia shrugged. “I had planned on going to Manchester, but I changed my mind. I have the right to change my mind, do I not?”

“You have no right going off on your own like that.” Elizabeth glanced at the savory pies in front of her, but her hunger had dissipated. All she felt now was disappointment. “What if you had gotten hurt in some way?”

“Hertfordshire is a safe place.” Lydia took a bite of pie.

“Every place has its own hidden dangers.” Elizabeth tried hard to keep her voice calm, but failed.

“So, where did you spend the entire day? Who were you with?” Jane asked.

“I was with a friend of mine.”

“Does your friend happen to have a name, Lydia?” Elizabeth bowed her head and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Lydia was quiet for a long time, then said, “I do not see why that is important, but if you must know, I was with Mr. Wickham.”

“Mr. Wickham?” Elizabeth swallowed hard. “Please tell me you did not do anything —"

“Do not rush to conclusions,” Lydia murmured. “We spent the day talking, that’s all.”

“It was not right for you to spend the day with a man.” Elizabeth folded her hands in her lap. “Especially one with a reputation like that

of Mr. Wickham's. And for you not to tell us was rash and careless."

"I can assure you that Mr. Wickham was a perfect gentleman."

Mary looked up from her meal. "I thought you had planned on offering yourself to Mr. Collins. Have you changed your mind?"

"I had not really wished to marry Mr. Collins. I despise the man. I only wanted to ruffle your feathers, Lizzie. I felt you were being selfish for not marrying Mr. Collins when it could save our family from financial ruin." As Lydia spoke, her eyes were on Elizabeth's face. "I shall not marry Mr. Collins because one day I will be marrying Mr. Wickham."

"You cannot be serious, Lydia." Jane dropped her spoon into her plate.

Elizabeth was grateful for Jane's response as she was still reeling after what Lydia had said about her.

"Has he already made you an offer?" Kitty asked, her eyes dancing. "Will you really marry the most handsome man in Hertfordshire?"

"Not yet, but I'm certain he will. He promised to call on me soon so we can make plans." Lydia's face brightened. "He cares for me deeply."

Elizabeth decided to ignore Lydia's earlier remark that had cut so deeply and instead decided to contribute to the conversation, to help her sister see sense. "You know how we feel about Mr. Wickham. You heard the things everyone has been saying about him. It's said that every second day he has a new lady on his arm. Surely you would not like to be his lady of the moment."

Elizabeth was not proud to accept other people's gossip as truth, but she was desperate to protect Lydia from choosing the wrong man and getting hurt.

"I already discussed that with Mr. Wickham and he promised me that his affections are for me and no one else."

"What if Mama and Papa don't approve of your union?" Mrs. Bennet had heard all the rumors, at the ball, and when they had returned home, she had again urged Lydia to stay away from the man. According to Mrs. Bennet, the only thing he offered was his good looks and charm. Apparently, he did not have much of a fortune to his name.

Lydia pushed back her chair and got to her feet. "We shall not allow anyone to stand in the way of our love. You all know as well as I do that there are ways to marry without permission from the parents." For the second time in as many days, Lydia stormed out.

"Do you really think they might elope?" Elizabeth asked Jane when they prepared for bed that night.

"I do not think we have reason to worry. If Mr. Wickham is the kind of man that we think he is, he will soon find another woman to

pursue, and Lydia's reputation will be safe." Jane buried herself under the blankets and rested her cheek on her hand.

"I only wish Mama and Papa were here to handle her." Elizabeth felt a renewed appreciation for her parents. It baffled her how they managed her younger sisters while she could not even have a conversation with Lydia that did not end in her running off.

Jane closed her eyes. "The main thing is that she's back. And I believe she's telling the truth that Mr. Wickham has not touched her in any way that may be deemed inappropriate."

"You're right. We should be grateful for her return." After the scene Lydia had made in the dining room earlier, Elizabeth hoped her sister would not do another foolish thing as a way to punish her.

"There's something you should know." Jane opened her drowsy eyes again. "Mr. Collins came by shortly before you arrived."

"Goodness! What did he want?" Elizabeth had hoped that after being rejected yet again, he would return to Kent and never bother them again.

"He wanted to know whether you had made your final decision."

"Does the man have ears? I was perfectly clear last time." Elizabeth shook her head. "I hope you told him that my decision was final and I shall never be his wife."

"That I did. I told him you stood by your decision not to marry him. I hope it was right to do so. He was quite drunk and I needed him to leave."

"You said the right thing," Elizabeth said, her temples throbbing with rage. "How dare he show up here in such a state?"

"Fortunately, Mrs. Robins and the gardener were close by and we were not completely alone with him."

"Did he try anything improper?"

"Not really. But he was infuriated. He accused us of hiding you inside the house. When I demanded that he leave, he was fuming."

"Did he say when he will be returning to Kent? I hate to have him so near."

"Thankfully, yes. He said he was returning to his parsonage right away as there was nothing of value to keep him in Hertfordshire." Jane propped herself up on an elbow. "But he *did* warn us that as soon as Papa was no more, he would return to take everything away. He said he would leave us without a penny."

"Let us pray that it does not come to that." Elizabeth's heart was thudding as she lay on her bed, weighed down by everything that happened that day. She prayed that their father would not succumb to his illness. She was disgusted by the idea that their home could belong to a man who showed no affection for his own cousin. Mr. Collins had not even considered going to Manchester to inquire about their

father's health.

She decided that she would write their mother a letter in the morning to tell her about everything that had been happening in her absence. It would upset her, but it was important that she know.

She would not mention Lydia's behavior as her sister deserved another chance to prove herself, but Mr. Collins deserved to have his true character revealed.

Elizabeth was unable to fight sleep, but before she slipped into dreams, she sent up a whispered prayer that the following day would be kinder to them.

Chapter 7

The next day, Elizabeth was in Meryton to purchase supplies for the house, when she walked past the local registry office. Normally, she would walk right past, but today, she found herself halting in front of the window. Something had caught her attention: a pale-yellow note that advertised a position for a housemaid.

As she stood there, reading about the qualifications required for the position, something inside her shifted.

She and her sisters had been fortunate for most of their lives. Since birth, they had been served. Now for the first time in her life, Elizabeth wondered how it felt to be the person who served others.

The thought surprised her, but now that it had infiltrated her mind, she was unable to rid herself of it. What if things did not work out as they hoped and they were forced into a life they were not accustomed to, one where they had to find a way to survive? It would certainly be difficult to adjust after having lived such a privileged life.

She hated the thought of being thrown into such a life with no preparation. Would it be so terrible if she were to prepare herself for the worst?

Without much thought or hesitation, she found herself entering the registry office, where she was met by a woman with gray hair wrapped in a thick braid that hung down her back.

"Good morning, Miss," she said to Elizabeth, her gaze sweeping her from head to toe. "Are you looking to advertise a position?"

Before Elizabeth could respond, she glanced around her and was relieved to find that it was only the two of them.

"No," she said in a lowered voice. "I have come to inquire about the position I saw advertised in the window." She took a quick breath. "I was wondering if it is still open."

"The position of a housemaid?" The woman's brows drew together.

Did she recognize her as one of the Bennet sisters? It would not surprise her as their names were on the lips of so many. Heat flooded Elizabeth's cheeks, but she soon collected herself and pushed back her shoulders in confidence. "Yes, the position of housemaid. Is it still open?"

“Well,” the woman hesitated, “as far as I know, it is.” She gave her a ghost of a smile. “Do you know of anyone who would be interested?”

“Indeed.” Elizabeth smiled back. “Would you kindly give me more information about that position?”

The smile on the woman’s face wavered, but she nodded. “Of course. Please wait a moment.” She disappeared to the back of the room and returned with a piece of paper that was the same color as the one in the window. “It’s true that the position has not yet been filled. It also states here that the successful candidate will be asked to start work immediately.”

When the woman informed Elizabeth of the wages the housemaid would earn, she did her best not to flinch. The pay was meager compared to what she would have hoped to earn. But at the moment, it was not the money that motivated her, but rather the experience, for now at least. Whatever she earned she would give to her sisters to purchase items that would cheer them up.

The woman finally looked up at Elizabeth’s face. “May I know who is interested in the position?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I am. I am interested in applying.”

“You?” The woman’s eyes widened. “You wish to apply for the position of a housemaid? But Miss Bennet—”

“You know who I am?”

The woman averted her gaze. “I know most people around here.”

“Well, I hope you do not have anything against my interest in the position.” Elizabeth did not care what she or anyone else thought about her decision.

It was a long moment before the woman responded, but then she resumed smiling. “Of course not. Do you have experience in the area?”

“I’m afraid not.” Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed, but she would not allow her lack of confidence to show. “I consider myself to be a fast learner and I would appreciate the opportunity to prove myself.” On the advertisement Elizabeth had read that one of the qualities required was the ability to learn a new task at great speed. And she was perfectly capable of doing that.

“But experience is required for this position, Miss Bennet.”

“I fully understand, but I would still like to apply, if you do not mind. It is the employer who would make the final decision, am I correct?” When the woman gave a curt nod, Elizabeth let out a nervous laugh. “How silly of me! I have forgotten to ask whether the position is for a household in the area.”

“Netherfield,” the woman said and a heavy feeling settled in Elizabeth’s stomach.

“Netherfield Park?” she asked in a broken whisper.

“That’s the place. And currently, the master of the household is a Mr. Darcy.”

“I’m sorry I wasted your time.” Elizabeth turned away from the woman. “I do not need the position after all. I apologize for wasting your time.”

“No need to apologize.”

As Elizabeth walked out of the registry office, she felt the woman’s gaze on her back.

She spent the next few minutes walking up and down Meryton, deep in thought. Although she was still interested in taking a position, she did not wish to work for Mr. Darcy, a man who had said unkind things about her family. Also, it would be rather embarrassing for her to have been at Netherfield for a ball and to return as a maid.

But after thinking it through, she came to the conclusion that she was not someone who bothered herself with what people thought of her. Pushing aside her pride, she returned to the registry office.

The woman was surprised to see her return, but she quickly hid her surprise. “Does the job interest you, after all?”

“I was wondering if there are other positions available.”

“I’m afraid, Miss Bennet, most households are not hiring at present. And the jobs that are available are well below your station.”

“I see.” Elizabeth closed her eyes briefly. When she reopened them, she had made a decision. “In that case, I would like to apply for the position of housemaid at Netherfield Park.”

“Very well,” the woman replied.

Some minutes later, Elizabeth left the registry office. She was asked to return in five days to find out if her application was successful or not. The chances were slim that she would get the position, but the simple act of pushing aside her pride and doing something most ladies would never have the courage to do gave her great satisfaction.

For the next five days, she found it difficult not to tell her sisters what she had done, but she chose not to do so until she was certain about whether her application was successful.

When she finally went back to the registry office, Elizabeth was shocked to learn that even with no experience, she was offered the position.

“I do not believe it,” she breathed.

“I have to say I was quite surprised myself,” the woman said. “Especially since the employer chose not to interview you before coming to a decision.”

“That is rather strange.”

It surprised Elizabeth even more that Mr. Darcy would choose her after the things he’d said at the ball. She had been of the impression

that he did not think much of her. “Were there other candidates?” she asked.

“Yes, there were quite a few and some of the candidates were very qualified.” The woman lowered herself into a chair behind a polished table. “At first the housekeeper of Netherfield dismissed your application. She was interested in someone with more experience, but Mr. Darcy happened to pass by and insisted that you should get the position.” The woman ran a hand down her braid. “The housekeeper has requested that you go to Netherfield Park to speak to her as soon as possible.”

“Today?” Elizabeth tipped her head to the side.

“The sooner, the better.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said. “I shall head there right away.”

She did not waste any time, and as soon as she left the registry office, she walked the entire distance to Netherfield. When she arrived, she was breathless with exhaustion, but she refused to allow distance to keep her from doing what she felt was the right thing.

She was met by a woman by the name of Mrs. Fletcher, an older woman with a tight bun on top of her head, who introduced herself as the housekeeper. From her pinched expression, Elizabeth knew instantly that she did not approve of her hiring.

“Miss Bennet,” Mrs. Fletcher said in a throaty voice. “I’m sure you are aware that the position can be quite taxing, especially for someone with no experience.”

Elizabeth tilted her chin upward. “Certainly, Mrs. Fletcher. And I am prepared to learn everything I need to know. I truly appreciate this opportunity and I shall not disappoint you.”

“I should hope not.” Mrs. Fletcher said, her voice flat. “Come with me. I would like to show you the house and introduce you to the other servants.”

While Elizabeth followed her from room to room, she expected to come across Mr. Darcy. Despite what he had said at the ball, she would have appreciated the opportunity to thank him for offering her the position.

For a moment, she wondered whether he gave her the job as a way to humiliate her. Perhaps he thought she would give it up after the first day of being subjected to hard work. If that was his intention, she was determined to prove him wrong, to show him and everyone else that she was stronger than she looked, and that she did not need a husband to provide for her.

When she asked Mrs. Fletcher about him, she mentioned that he was traveling and said nothing more than that.

Much to Elizabeth’s disappointment, the other servants were just as unwelcoming as Mrs. Fletcher. As soon as she turned her back, she

heard the whispers. They knew who she was and they obviously resented her for getting a position that should have gone to one of their own.

"I will now show you the servants' quarters," Mrs. Fletcher said, closing the door to the kitchen.

"That won't be necessary." Elizabeth came to a halt in the corridor. "I mentioned in the application that I wish to return home each day after work."

"Yes, that is true. I had forgotten." Mrs. Fletcher clasped her hands in front of herself, her expression still hard. "To be perfectly honest with you, Miss Bennet, I prefer the servants to stay at Netherfield should they be needed at night, but it seems Mr. Darcy had no issue with you leaving each day." A cloud passed across her features. "A carriage will be provided for your transportation."

"That is very kind of you, Mrs. Fletcher."

"I have nothing to do with it. Mr. Darcy seems to think you require preferential treatment."

Unsure of how to respond, Elizabeth decided to bite her tongue. Not long after, she was dismissed and could return home.

~

BACK AT THE LONGBOURN HOUSE, Elizabeth gathered up the courage to tell her sisters about her new position. As she had expected, they were shocked.

"That is no job for a lady," Lydia said.

"You shall taint your reputation," Kitty continued.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do, Lizzie?" Jane's expression was one of worry. "Things are not yet so bad that you are required to work."

"I know. But should they become worse, I would prefer to be prepared."

Jane simply nodded, but worry was still etched upon her features.

Chapter 8

When the carriage arrived to collect Elizabeth on her first day of work, she was both exhilarated and terrified.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" Jane asked, wringing her hands nervously.

Elizabeth smiled at her sister. "This is something I need to do. I will see you in the evening." Mrs. Bennet would be horrified if she knew that her daughter would be working as a servant, but now that Elizabeth had the position, she refused to concern herself with what others thought, including her mother. She felt empowered at the thought of doing something she perceived to be of value.

She pressed a kiss to Jane's cheek and hurried out of the house.

When Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield Park, Mrs. Fletcher was the first person to meet her.

"Good morning, Miss Bennet." She placed a bundle of folded gray clothing into Elizabeth's hands. "This is your uniform."

Elizabeth nodded. "I look forward to working here."

Mrs. Fletcher nodded, but her lips were still pinched. "I'm afraid there have been changes to the kind of work you will be doing. One of the laundry maids has fallen ill and you will replace her until she recovers."

Elizabeth swallowed hard. She had been told that her work would be cleaning rooms and making beds, tasks she was sure she could do with ease.

"Would that be a problem, Miss Bennet?" Mrs. Fletcher folded her arms across her chest.

It instantly dawned on Elizabeth what was happening. She was sure Mrs. Fletcher and perhaps the other servants were planning to overwhelm her with the most difficult work so she would be forced to leave. They had, after all, not hidden the fact that she was unwanted at Netherfield.

She would not let them win.

"Not at all, Mrs. Fletcher," she said with a smile. "I'm prepared to do any work that's assigned to me."

Mrs. Fletcher's expression tightened for a moment, and then she

turned on her heel. “Follow me. There’s plenty of washing to be done today.”

As soon as Elizabeth had changed into her uniform, which was a bit too big for her, she was taken to the washing room. It pleased her greatly to find that the second laundry maid seemed kinder than Mrs. Fletcher and the other servants.

After Mrs. Fletcher had given her the instructions and left them to themselves, the freckled girl, who seemed to be the same age as Mary, smiled at her. “I’m Emily Elliott. It’s good to meet you, Miss Bennet. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Emily was beautiful in a fragile kind of way, and she had curly blonde hair that framed her sweetheart face.

“And nothing good, I’m sure,” Elizabeth teased.

When Emily’s pale cheeks colored, Elizabeth got her answer.

“It’s all right.” Elizabeth smiled to sweep aside the tension. “You need not respond. It’s written all over your face.”

Emily giggled, then glanced at the clothing that needed to be washed. Elizabeth followed her gaze and blanched.

“We need to get through all that today?” she asked, her eyes widening.

“I’m afraid so.” Emily approached the mountain of clothing, then looked back at Elizabeth, who still stood in the middle of the room, unsure of what to do next. “I was told this is the first time you will be doing the washing.”

“It is. And to be honest, I don’t know where to begin.” Elizabeth was sure that Mrs. Fletcher had purposely not shown her how the job was done in order for her to fail at it.

“Nothing to worry about, Miss Bennet,” Emily said. “I’m here to show you. It’s not as dreadful as it looks.”

“You’re very kind.” Elizabeth let out a sigh of relief. She felt fortunate to have someone who was kind enough to instruct her. “But please, do not call me Miss Bennet. Call me Lizzie.”

“As you wish.” Emily picked up a pair of breeches. “Shall we get started?”

Elizabeth nodded. For the next few minutes, she listened and watched carefully as Emily demonstrated how to wash the first pieces of clothing. Elizabeth also did her best to recall the number of times she had snuck in on the servants while they worked, even though Mrs. Bennet had told the sisters not to disturb them. When her mother was not present, Elizabeth would sometimes sit quietly, watching the servants work. From recalling those times and Emily’s brief training, Lizzie’s confidence grew. She was determined to surprise Mrs. Fletcher.

“May I join you now?” she asked Emily.

Emily looked up. “Are you ready then?”

“I hope so. If not, I will learn by doing.” Elizabeth approached one of the washboards, then she focused her full attention on scrubbing the laundry on the board and rubbing it with soap.

“You’re quite good,” Emily said after some time. “No one would think this is your first time with the wash.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Elizabeth smiled, feeling quite proud of herself. Even though her sensitive hands felt irritated, she would not show her discomfort. She did not complain as they placed the laundry in boiling water and stirred it with a long pole to prevent it from yellowing. She did not complain when they finally rinsed it and wrung it out to dry. Even though sweat dripped into her eyes and her hands ached, she refused to give up.

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AT LUNCHTIME, Mrs. Fletcher reappeared to ask them to join the other servants in the kitchen to eat.

At the table, Elizabeth’s stomach churned with anxiety as the others ignored her. Although Emily glanced at her from time to time as though to offer her comfort, she also didn’t exchange any words with her, which Elizabeth could understand. Emily probably feared that if she conversed with Elizabeth, the others would consider her a traitor and turn their backs on her as well.

Although the food was quite simple compared to what she was accustomed to, Elizabeth ate without complaining. And while the other servants spoke to each other, she merely listened.

“Mrs. Rowley,” Mrs. Fletcher said to one of the maids. “I hope you have finished preparing Mr. Darcy’s chambers. He shall return from Manchester later this afternoon.”

Upon hearing the words, Elizabeth straightened up in her chair, listening intently to the conversation as she chewed her food.

“Everything is ready for him,” Mrs. Rowley responded.

As Elizabeth continued to listen to their conversation, she wondered about Mr. Darcy’s reasons for travelling to Manchester. But she would not ask the others.

Later in the evening, when her job was done and the carriage was about to take her back to Longbourn, Mr. Darcy arrived.

“Good evening, Miss Bennet,” he said. “Welcome to Netherfield.”

Elizabeth noticed that when he spoke, he would not look her in the eye.

“As you know, it’s not my first time,” Elizabeth said. “But I’m grateful for the opportunity to work here. I was very surprised to be offered the position without any experience.” Elizabeth was not sure

why she had to say that to him, but she needed to. She needed to know whether he had offered her the position in order to humiliate her. Or was he in fact a good man after all and she had failed to see it?

"I was surprised to see your application as well, but it was not my place to ask why you would choose to seek employment." He cleared his throat. "I give jobs to people who are willing to work. You stated in your application that you were prepared to learn."

"I appreciate your confidence in me and I shall not fail you."

"Good." He glanced down at the hat in his hands, then looked up again. This time their eyes met briefly. "Then I'll see you in the morning?"

Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy walking away, but before he could disappear into the house, she called for him.

"Mr. Darcy, I heard you were in Manchester," she said, curiosity getting the better of her.

"I was," he replied.

"May I know why?" Elizabeth asked without giving much thought to her question.

"Why I visited Manchester?"

"Yes, sir."

He went silent for a long time. When he spoke again, his voice was firm. "Miss Bennet, I do hope you understand, but I do not wish to speak about private matters, especially with one of the servants."

Elizabeth nodded. "Certainly," she said, but her hands curled into fists behind her back, and her cheeks burned.

Only minutes before she had begun to think of him as a good man, but the tone of his voice when he had spoken to her had been humiliating. He had made it clear that she was nothing but a servant. What if this was only the beginning? What if he continued to humiliate her in discrete ways?

"Mr. Darcy, I had merely asked a question out of interest. But your response was rather unkind."

He drew in a breath. "Miss Bennet, I hired you because you were in need of a job. Asking about my private affairs is not in your job description."

"Perhaps I made a mistake," Elizabeth said, gritting her teeth. "Perhaps I should not have applied to work here at all."

"What are you trying to tell me, Miss Bennet?" Mr. Darcy narrowed his eyes. "Are you saying you no longer want the position?"

"I think I am. Perhaps this is not the right position for me, Mr. Darcy."

"You wish to give up the position merely because I do not wish to discuss my personal affairs with you?" Mr. Darcy tipped his head to

the side.

"It has nothing to do with respecting your personal affairs, Mr. Darcy. But I do believe everyone independent of their position deserves to be respected. Your response to me was quite insulting."

While she waited for Mr. Darcy to respond, Mrs. Fletcher glanced out the nearby window, shooting her daggers. She had made it clear to Elizabeth earlier that she was not to address the master of the house unless absolutely necessary.

"I apologize if that's how you feel, Miss Bennet. But I was simply being honest." Mr. Darcy gave Elizabeth a veiled look. "But if you wish to no longer work here, I shall not stop you from leaving."

"It's for the best," Elizabeth said. "I wish you a good evening, Mr. Darcy." Before Mr. Darcy could say anything more to bruise her ego, Elizabeth hurried to the carriage and got in.

~

ELIZABETH WAS STILL furious when she arrived at the Longbourn house.

"Did your day not go as you had hoped?" Jane asked when they sat down to eat dinner.

"It started out well. Then something happened that made me realize that perhaps Mr. Darcy is not the kind of person I would like for an employer."

"What in the world happened?" Jane touched the base of her neck while the other sisters also waited in anticipation for Elizabeth's response.

"He was not very considerate, that's all."

"Does that mean you will no longer work for him?" Mary asked.

"I think it does," Elizabeth said.

Chapter 9

When Elizabeth woke up the next day, she regretted having left her position at Netherfield.

"Maybe I was too sensitive," she said to Jane as she got out of bed.

"What do you mean?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "What if I overreacted? He was right. I had no business asking about his personal affairs."

Elizabeth sank back down onto the bed, her head in her hands. "If we had been dependent on the job, surely I would not have left it so easily. And the reason I took on the position was to prepare myself should the worst happen." She looked up. "I feel like I failed myself."

"What are you saying, Lizzie? Would you like to return to Netherfield?"

"I think I should." Elizabeth did not want Mr. Darcy to think of her as a spoiled girl who threw tantrums when things did not go her way. She had wanted to prove to him that she was capable of fending for herself.

Jane picked lint from her dress. "I do not feel comfortable with you taking on a position, but if this is something you think you must do, you should return."

"After what happened yesterday, I doubt Mr. Darcy would give me my job back, but I should at least go and apologize for my behavior."

With that decision firmly in her heart, Elizabeth dressed. While her sisters sat down for breakfast, she walked to Netherfield.

Her heart sank when one of the maids called Mrs. Fletcher to come and speak to her.

"I'm surprised to see you back at Netherfield. I was informed you would not be returning to your position." Her lips thinned with annoyance. "I was just about to visit the registry office to start the process of filling the position."

"You were misinformed, Mrs. Fletcher," Mr. Darcy said, appearing as though from nowhere.

Elizabeth spun around to see him approaching. When their eyes met, she felt her heart turn over and heat flooded into her cheeks.

Confusion swept across Mrs. Fletcher's face. "Mr. Darcy, I was of

the impression that—"

"Mrs. Fletcher, I will handle this." Mr. Darcy nodded at Elizabeth. "Good morning, Miss Bennet." His voice sounded gentler than it had been when they parted ways the evening before.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy." When Elizabeth recalled how she had spoken to him only hours before, her stomach clenched with embarrassment. No servant had the right to speak to her employer the way she had spoken to Mr. Darcy.

"Very well, sir." Mrs. Fletcher looked at Elizabeth, then back at Mr. Darcy before she retreated into the house.

"Please come in, Miss Bennet. Would you care to follow me to the parlor?"

"Of course, Mr. Darcy."

Inside the parlor, Elizabeth was glad to be offered a seat. After the long walk her legs threatened to give way beneath her. When Mr. Darcy asked if she wanted tea, she shook her head.

The door to the parlor was ajar and from time to time she noticed the servants walking by, peering into the room as though curious to hear what Mr. Darcy was discussing with her. There was no doubt that Mrs. Fletcher had informed them of Elizabeth's return.

She turned back to Mr. Darcy. "I have returned to apologize for my behavior. The words I spoke to you yesterday were uncalled for."

Mr. Darcy lowered himself onto one of the sofas and shook his head. "Miss Bennet, it is I who should be apologizing to you." He rubbed the back of his neck. "You had asked a question and it was unkind of me to respond the way I did."

"But you were right. Your private affairs are none of my concern. And as a servant, I had no right to speak to you the way I did." Now that she had had a chance to think about it, Elizabeth could not understand why she had been so upset at being referred to as a servant. That was what she was, after all. "I hope you will forgive me."

"Only if you will do the same for me," Mr. Darcy said. "It does not matter whether one is an employer or an employee, there should be mutual respect. I treated you callously."

"I appreciate you saying that." Elizabeth glanced at the door just as one of the kitchen maids was walking by. "I have also come in the hopes of resuming my position." She looked back at him and held her breath as she awaited his response.

He raised an eyebrow. "You wish to continue on as a maid?"

"If that position or any other is still open, I shall be grateful to have it. When I arrived, Mrs. Fletcher said she was about to visit the registry—"

"I have not requested her to do so." Mr. Darcy was silent for a

while. “Although the position has not yet been filled, Miss Bennet, I would like to offer you another.”

“I do not understand.” Elizabeth expected that, if anything, he would give her a much lower position after the disrespect she had shown him.

“I would like you to work side-by-side with Mrs. Fletcher to assist her in her role of housekeeper.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard. “Why? Why would you offer me such a high position, and one I’m far less qualified for?” Elizabeth was shocked that Mr. Darcy would make her such a generous offer. She would have considered herself fortunate to work as a laundry maid again. “As you are aware, I do not have the experience.”

“I’m aware of it, and I’m offering you the opportunity to learn. That is what you had requested in your application, was it not?”

“Indeed.” Elizabeth’s heart leapt inside her chest. “I do not know what to say.”

“You need not say a word.” Mr. Darcy smiled back, but with hesitation. He was not accustomed to smiling. No matter. His actions further proved his good character. How could she have misjudged him so? The man she had met at the spring ball had seemed cold and unapproachable, but the version of Mr. Darcy sitting before her contrasted greatly to that man.

“I am also offering you this position because I know you’re a hard worker. I spoke to the laundry maid, Miss Elliott and she said you did a splendid job during your short time here.”

“Did she really?”

Mr. Darcy nodded. “She had a lot of praise for you, and I pride myself in being constant in rewarding hard work.”

Elizabeth brought a hand to her chest. “Mr. Darcy, I cannot thank you enough.”

“You have thanked me quite enough, Miss Bennet.” Mr. Darcy rose from the sofa and went to the window. “In answer to your question yesterday, I was in Manchester as one of my relatives required my assistance concerning a business matter.”

“You need not explain, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth was touched that he still felt the need to offer her a reason. “I had only asked you about your trip to Manchester because my parents are currently there. My father is quite ill and one of his good friends is caring for him.”

“I did hear about your father’s illness, and I deeply hope he will regain his health quite soon.”

Elizabeth fought the urge to ask him whether he had heard anything more about her father’s health. The rumors that Mr. Bennet had died still weighed heavily on her heart, but the fact that Mr. Darcy had not mentioned anything about her father dying, told her

that he must still be alive.

She drew in a deep breath and rose to her feet. “I have taken up too much of your time, sir. I should like to start working.”

Mr. Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Would you not prefer to start tomorrow?”

“That is not necessary. Since I’m already here, I might as well start right away.”

“Well then, I shall notify Mrs. Fletcher of your new position.” Mr. Darcy paused. “Miss Bennet, you should know that I respect what you are doing for your family. Not many ladies, no matter their circumstances, would willingly choose to work. Many would rather starve than demean themselves.”

“I appreciate your kind words, but I only do what needs to be done.”

He stepped toward the door. “I shall inform Mrs. Fletcher of the good news.”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened at his statement. Mrs. Fletcher would not find what Mr. Darcy was about to tell her to be good news. She would hate working so closely with her.

Not long after Mr. Darcy left the parlor, Mrs. Fletcher walked in, her lips a thin slash across her face. To Elizabeth’s surprise, she did not say much except to explain to her what was required of her in her new role.

Elizabeth listened carefully and during the course of the day, she did more than was expected of her. Working twice as hard was her way of repaying Mr. Darcy for his kindness, and even though the other servants did not hide the fact that they were vexed by her return, she found the courage to ignore them. She was not at Netherfield to make friends.

Once her work was done and it was time for her to return to Longbourn, she was exhausted but also happier than she had been in quite a while. When she arrived home, she was excited to tell Jane the good news, but Jane had good news of her own and could not wait to tell Elizabeth. Elizabeth put hers on hold and sat down with her sister.

“Tell me everything,” she said. “What happened in my absence?”

“Oh, Lizzie. We went to Meryton today and I overheard someone speaking about Mr. Bingley. Apparently, he will return to Netherfield.”

“Do you know when?” Elizabeth asked, taking her sister’s hand in hers. She was excited for Jane, but also worried as Mr. Bingley had not written to inform her himself.

“No, but I believe it will be quite soon.” Jane smiled brightly. “I would have loved for him to tell me himself, of course, but perhaps he would like to surprise me.”

Elizabeth nodded and embraced her sister. “Darling Jane, I hope you will be reunited soon. I wish you more happiness than you can hold in your heart.”

There was nothing Elizabeth wished for her sister more than for her to find the perfect match, a man who would be able to offer her both love and the kind of life she deserved. Although she did not mind working as a servant, she did not wish for her sisters to be forced to do the same.

“I also have very pleasant news,” Elizabeth said.

“Since you’re only arriving at this time of day, I assume Mr. Darcy has welcomed you back to Netherfield? I’m so pleased he gave you back your position.”

“Not quite. He did give me a position, but one that is far better than that of a laundry maid.”

“Is that true?” Jane clutched Elizabeth’s hand. “What position is that?”

“He has offered me the position of housekeeper. Remember Mrs. Fletcher? I once mentioned her to you.”

“The housekeeper? Yes, you did mention her.”

“Well, I shall be working side-by-side with her as her assistant.”

“That is quite a high rank in the household.” Jane looked surprised. “I am pleased for you, of course, but I had come to think of Mr. Darcy as being unkind.”

“I thought so as well, but it seems I was wrong about his character.” As Elizabeth spoke about Mr. Darcy, she felt a pleasant yet unfamiliar feeling in the pit of her stomach. She pushed it aside.

“I’m awfully happy for you, Lizzie. After how the past few days have been, I’m glad today was kinder to us.”

Elizabeth nodded, then her face grew serious. “How has Lydia been? She was at her best behavior, I hope.” Since Elizabeth had arrived rather late, her other sisters were already in bed and she did not want to disturb them.

Jane’s shoulders visibly sank. “I’m afraid she’s still quite difficult. She kept complaining about how we were standing between her and Mr. Wickham.”

“I do not see how. If Mr. Wickham cared for her as deeply as Lydia believes, he would have called on her, would he not?” Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “Or did he visit her in my absence?”

“Not that I know of.” Jane tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. “I’m terribly worried about her.”

“So am I, but I believe that if Mr. Wickham does not visit her in the next few days, she will finally see him for the man everyone says he is.” Elizabeth stood up to prepare herself for bed. “By the way, Mr. Darcy heard about Papa’s condition when he was in Manchester. And

he did not give me a reason to believe that Papa has succumbed to his illness."

"That is good news."

"It certainly is," Elizabeth said. "Hopefully his condition will improve soon and he and Mama will return to Hertfordshire. I miss them dearly."

"I do too," Jane said.

The two sisters fell into silence and soon went to sleep hoping to receive more good news in the coming days.

Chapter 10

Two days had passed since Elizabeth was offered the position of assistant housekeeper. Although she still felt uncomfortable working with Mrs. Fletcher, who was still as unkind as ever, she did not allow it to upset her. The most important thing to her was that Mr. Darcy approved of her working at Netherfield. She was determined to repay his kindness and continued to work hard each day.

"It's time for you to leave," Mrs. Fletcher said, glancing out the window. "And since the carriage is not available today, I'm afraid you will have to walk through the rain."

Elizabeth followed her gaze and panic welled up inside her chest as she noticed the thunderstorm raging outside the window. She had planned on walking home, but she was certain that if she did, she would fall ill. Mrs. Fletcher did not seem to care. Perhaps she even hoped Elizabeth would fall ill since that might be the only way to keep her from working.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Fletcher." Elizabeth squared her shoulders. "I will see you in the morning."

As she walked away, she heard Mrs. Fletcher mumble something under her breath, but she did not care to know what she was saying.

Just as Elizabeth was about to walk out the door, her fingers tight around the handle of her umbrella, Mr. Darcy appeared in the entrance hall, frowning.

"Miss Bennet, you do not plan on going out in that storm, do you?"

"I'm afraid I have no choice. The carriage is not available."

"Even if it were available, there are floods everywhere. It would not be safe for anyone to travel in this kind of weather."

"I must take my chances." Elizabeth gazed out the window, watching the water gushing from the sky and flooding the grounds of Netherfield Park. She tightened her hand even more around her umbrella.

"Miss Bennet, I would not be at peace with myself if I let you go out in this storm. I would prefer it if you stay the night at Netherfield. You can return home tomorrow."

"That is very kind of you to offer, but I would not like to be an

inconvenience."

"You would not be an inconvenience. As an employee, you're a member of this household. You're just as welcome to stay as everyone else here."

Elizabeth looked from him to the window, wondering whether she should accept his offer. She had not seen much of him in the past two days, but each time they were in the same room, he was nothing but kind to her. "I do not know what to say," she said finally.

"A yes would suffice," he said.

Mr. Darcy was right. There was no way she would make it home without being completely drenched. "In that case, yes. I gladly accept your kind offer." She loosened her grip on the handle of the umbrella. "I will ask Mrs. Fletcher if there is a bed available in the servants' quarters."

"That is not necessary. If you do not mind, I would rather you take one of the guest chambers."

Elizabeth was speechless for a long moment. "I'm a servant, Mr. Darcy. I could not possibly sleep in the rooms reserved for the guests."

"I see no reason why you should not. If the master of the household gives you permission to sleep in a comfortable room, there is no reason for you to feel distressed."

"I do not understand why you're doing this. Why are you being so kind to me?"

"I only wish for you to sleep comfortably tonight. Tomorrow night if you wish to return home, you're free to do so."

As she gazed into Mr. Darcy's eyes, Elizabeth felt a flutter in the pit of her stomach, which she continued to disregard. "Your kindness is overwhelming."

"I'm simply doing what any normal human being would do in this situation. I do not understand why you seem so surprised."

Elizabeth averted her gaze. "I have a confession to make. The first time I met you at the ball, I overheard you and Mr. Bingley speaking about my family. After what I heard, I had come to think of you as a very disagreeable man. But lately, you have shown me a different version of yourself, one I am still becoming accustomed to."

Elizabeth watched as Mr. Darcy shifted. "Miss Bennet, it is unfortunate that oftentimes we say things without giving much thought to how they might impact others. I made a thoughtless comment and for that I apologize." From the expression of remorse on his face, Elizabeth knew he meant every word he said.

"I accept your apology, Mr. Darcy." What Mr. Darcy did not know was that Elizabeth had already forgiven him. His actions in the past few days more than made up for every unkind word he had said.

"Well then, I will ask Mrs. Fletcher to prepare one of the guest

chambers for you." As Mr. Darcy left Elizabeth in the entrance hall, she felt uneasy about spending the night in a guest chamber when the other servants slept elsewhere. Mrs. Fletcher would find even more reason to dislike her.

The room Mr. Darcy had asked Mrs. Fletcher to prepare for her was one of the most spacious and luxurious, and Elizabeth was moved beyond words by his generosity. After admiring the space around her, she turned to thank Mrs. Fletcher for preparing the room, but the woman was already gone. But as Elizabeth lowered herself onto the bed, she returned to light the fire.

"That is not necessary," Elizabeth said as she watched the woman bending down in front of the hearth. "I do not need a fire to be lit for me. The room is warm enough."

"It's what Mr. Darcy has requested. I'm only following his orders." She spoke sharply without turning to look at Elizabeth.

"I had asked to sleep in the servants' quarters," Elizabeth said, hoping to turn Mrs. Fletcher's wrath away from her. "It was Mr. Darcy who insisted I sleep in a guest chamber." When Mrs. Fletcher did not respond, Elizabeth continued. "I know you dislike me, Mrs. Fletcher, but I can assure you that I'm not a terrible person. I have come here to work, and if your hope is for me to feel so overwhelmed to the point that I quit my position, I am sorry to disappoint you. As long as Mr. Darcy requires my services, I will continue to work here at Netherfield, and I would greatly appreciate it if we could be cordial towards each other as we work side-by-side."

Although Mrs. Fletcher let out a sigh as she lit the fire, she did not respond to what Elizabeth had said. When she was done, she straightened up and finally looked at her. "Is there anything else you need, Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth hesitated before replying. "No, I'm perfectly fine. Whatever else I need I shall get myself. Thank you for your help."

Mrs. Fletcher left the room without saying good night, but Elizabeth could no longer find it inside her heart to care. She would no longer try to please her.

As she sat on the bed watching the rain water sliding down the window panes, she wished there were a way for her to inform her sisters that she would be spending the night at Netherfield.

Mr. Darcy had assured her that as soon as the sun came up and the rain stopped, he would send the footman to tell them she was all right so they would not worry an entire day until Elizabeth returned home in the evening.

Elizabeth was too exhausted to even worry. She crawled into bed, fully dressed and fell asleep immediately.

~

WHEN MR. DARCY appeared in Elizabeth's dreams, she woke up in a sweat, her heart pounding. She swung her legs out of bed and washed her face with water from a bowl that sat on one of the tables.

How could she have romantic dreams of Mr. Darcy? He was her employer, and as a servant, she was now far beneath him. She was sure there were many respectable ladies vying for his attention.

Forcing thoughts of him out of her mind, she returned to sleep.

In the morning, Mr. Darcy was the first person she saw as he walked past the room, the morning paper in his hand.

"I hope you slept well, Miss Bennet," he said.

"Very well, thank you." Elizabeth was unable to look him in the eye. After the dream she had last night, she felt very awkward in his presence.

"I'm glad to hear it." He paused. "I hope you were not given a hard time by the other employees."

"Not at all," Elizabeth lied. There was no need for him to know about Mrs. Fletcher's behavior toward her. She could handle it herself.

Mr. Darcy watched her face for a few seconds as though he suspected she was untruthful. Elizabeth wondered whether he had heard the other employees whispering about her.

"Should you find yourself in any trouble, I would like you to notify me at once."

Elizabeth nodded, but she would do no such thing. If she reported anyone, they would only dislike her more.

"I'm glad to tell you that the footman was already at Longbourn to let your sisters know that you're well. We wouldn't want them worrying unnecessarily."

All Elizabeth could do was nod and smile. She had thanked him so often that it felt strange to keep repeating the words. She hoped that even when she didn't speak, Mr. Darcy knew how appreciative she was.

He continued to be kind to her for the next two weeks, which made it easier for her to handle the abuse from some of the other servants. As much as they wished for her to go away, she refused to give them what they wanted, to show weakness.

She was determined to continue working at Netherfield Park until her family's financial situation improved.

Chapter 11

Elizabeth was dusting the pianoforte in the drawing room at Netherfield, when a headache struck her head so suddenly, she was forced to stumble to the nearest chair.

The exhaustion and worries of the past weeks were catching up with her. She had barely been able to sleep much as she was too busy worrying about Lydia, who was determined to make their lives harder than they already were.

Elizabeth had been feeling poorly all morning, but she refused to take a day off. The last thing she wanted was for Mrs. Fletcher to see any kind of weakness in her. The woman had not warmed to her and she looked for every opportunity that would prove Elizabeth was not a good fit for the job. No matter how hard she worked, oftentimes even harder than all of the other servants, they continued to shun her.

She had long stopped hoping she would be accepted.

"Miss Bennet, are you all right?" At hearing the familiar male voice, Elizabeth lifted her head. When her eyes met those of Mr. Darcy, she scrambled to her feet, swaying slightly with dizziness.

"Sorry, Mr. Darcy." She blinked several times. If only she could make the headache disappear. "I'm perfectly all right."

"I'm finding that hard to believe." He narrowed his eyes. "You look pale, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth forced a smile. "It's only because I have a slight headache. It's nothing to worry about."

"It definitely is something to worry about." Mr. Darcy took a step forward, but remained a distance away from Elizabeth. "I suggest you end your work here today. You should return home to rest."

Elizabeth shook her head. "That's kind of you, but I just started an hour ago. There's still so much that needs to be done. I cannot neglect my duties."

"And it will be done, just not by you. I shall not have you working when you're not in good health."

"Very well, sir," Elizabeth said. "I truly appreciate your concern." As much as she wanted to continue working, she had not had a break since she started working at Netherfield. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad

idea for her to go home and spend time with her family.

"I shall arrange for the carriage to take you home." Mr. Darcy turned to leave.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said but he was already gone.

She was only alone for a moment when Mrs. Fletcher walked in. From her expression, Elizabeth could already tell that she was not pleased with her.

"Is there something you would like to tell me?" Mrs. Fletcher asked, her dark eyes squinting.

"Mr. Darcy asked me to go home. I'm feeling unwell today."

"We all feel unwell from time to time, but we continue working. But I suppose we are not all treated equally in this household."

Elizabeth watched the older woman putting a finger to the pianoforte, then studying it for dust particles.

Elizabeth pulled in a breath and held it. Then she released it and straightened to her full height. She had had enough of being judged.

"Mrs. Fletcher, it was Mr. Darcy who insisted I stop working. If you have a problem with his decision, I suggest you speak to him." With that, Elizabeth walked out of the room to prepare for her departure.

A few minutes later, she sat inside the carriage, feeling proud of herself for standing up to Mrs. Fletcher. With every jolt of the carriage, the pain inside her head increased, but she was excited to be seeing her sisters during the day instead of at night.

As she neared the house, she caught sight of two ladies taking a stroll. She recognized them instantly and a shiver ran down her spine.

It was the Stapleton twins, two ladies well known for spreading gossip throughout Hertfordshire. They were similar in age to Jane, but they had already found husbands. As usual, they wore matching sky-blue dresses.

Elizabeth wondered what they were doing close to their home. It was none of her business as long as they did not call on them.

But call on them they did. Not long after she exited the carriage and entered the house, there was a knock on the door.

Mary hurried to open it with Elizabeth right behind her.

"It's Eleanor and Margaret Stapleton," Mary said in surprise. "How lovely of you to visit us."

"It's a pleasure," the sisters replied in unison.

Mary simply smiled, then walked off, leaving Elizabeth to deal with the twins.

"What a surprise," Elizabeth said just as Jane came to stand beside her. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"We saw you arriving at the house, Lizzie," Margaret said, glancing at her sister. "We were visiting a friend in the area. We thought it would be unkind not to pay you a visit as well."

The twins entered the house before Elizabeth or Jane could give them the permission to.

"That's very thoughtful of you," Jane said, but it was clear from her tone of voice that she was not fooled. She knew the twins and their motives just as well as Elizabeth did.

"In case you're thinking of offering us refreshments, please do not bother yourselves. We shall not be long. We simply came to see how you're doing after your father's untimely death and your mother's depression." Eleanor feigned sadness.

The Bennet sisters looked at each other, then Elizabeth faced the twins, her eyes blazing. "Our father's untimely death? What brings you to the conclusion that he is no more?"

Margaret placed a hand on her chest. "Is it not true? It's just that everyone is talking about it."

"It's not true," Jane retorted, her gentle voice suddenly hard.

"Jane is right. Whatever you heard are just rumors." Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest. "Our father is very much alive and regaining his health."

"Oh." Eleanor's cheeks colored. "We thought—well, then we are pleased for you." She glanced around the house with a look of distaste. "Lizzie, I suppose the rumors about you working as a maid at Netherfield are also untrue?"

Elizabeth smiled in spite of herself. She could not believe the nerve of this woman. "No, those are true. I'm currently employed as a housekeeper at Netherfield. I chose to work and I enjoy it."

"I cannot believe it." Margaret's eyes widened. "How could you possibly enjoy being a servant?"

Elizabeth waved a dismissive hand. "Do not worry yourself about it. I would not like to bore you with details."

"Not at all," Margaret said quickly. "You shall not bore us in the least. Maybe we would like those refreshments, after all."

"Oh, no." Jane shook her head. "Unfortunately, you came at an unfortunate time. We are rather occupied at the moment. It would be best if you come another day."

"I see." A scowl formed on Margaret's face. "Well, we shall not keep you any longer. We wish you well. Come on, Eleanor. Let us return to our husbands."

"Thank goodness," Jane said when the twins left. "How dare they show up here to gloat!"

"Yes, and to remind us that we have no husbands." Elizabeth's head pounded even more. "They did not even have the decency to hide the fact that they were desperate for information. For them to say to our faces that Papa has passed is insensitive."

"I agree," Jane said. "But it's best we don't give them any more of

our attention than they have already received." Jane took her sister's hand and ushered her through the corridor on their way to the bedroom. "Now it's time for you to lay yourself down. Mr. Darcy sent you home to rest and I intend to make sure you do."

When they walked past the door to the drawing room, Elizabeth peered through the door to see Mary, Kitty, and Lydia engrossed in a game of chess. She was glad to have them all at home instead of gallivanting around Meryton. Jane had told Elizabeth that Lydia had been sneaking off to search for Mr. Wickham.

"Are you sure you don't want me to help with anything in the house?" Sometimes Elizabeth felt guilty that everything at the house fell on Jane's shoulders while she worked at Netherfield.

"Not at all. We are very lucky to have Mrs. Robins. She's doing an amazing job keeping the household from falling apart."

"So are you, Jane."

In the bedroom, Elizabeth settled down in her bed and Jane watched her for a moment from the doorway.

"I think it's extremely kind of Mr. Darcy to let you come home early."

"Very kind, indeed, but as you can expect, Mrs. Fletcher was quite annoyed."

"Don't concern yourself with Mrs. Fletcher. Mr. Darcy is your employer and he had given you permission." Jane sat on the edge of the bed. "He has been so good to you since you started working there."

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "It still surprises me how different he is from the man we met at the ball."

"It sounds as though he had been hiding his true nature." Jane paused. "Could it be he's showing you kindness because he cares for you?"

Elizabeth's eyes flew open. "Jane, whatever do you mean by that?"

Jane shrugged. "Well, after everything you told me, he goes out of his way to make sure you're comfortable at Netherfield. Mrs. Fletcher is right in thinking he's giving you preferential treatment. I only wonder why."

"It does not in any way mean he cares for me." Elizabeth sat up in bed. "There are people out there who are kind for no reason at all."

"You're right," Jane said. "I'm just grateful he's making your time at Netherfield more bearable." Jane bit her lower lip. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Jane." Elizabeth reached out to touch her hand. "Anything."

"Has anyone at Netherfield spoken of Mr. Bingley's return?"

Elizabeth's heart shrank. She hated to disappoint her sister, but she

would not lie to her either. “I’m sorry. No one has said a word, not to me at least.”

Jane nodded, but Elizabeth could see the pain in her eyes. “That’s a shame.”

“Do not be disheartened. It could also be that Mr. Darcy had not communicated Mr. Bingley’s return to anyone.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Jane stood. “Whether he returns or not does not change the fact that he does not fancy me.”

Elizabeth felt the urge to say something that would ease her pain and disappointment, but what was the point of giving her false hope?

“I’m truly sorry that things did not turn out the way you wanted them to,” she said instead. “But who knows what the future holds? It might surprise us all.”

Jane nodded. “Enough talking. Get some sleep.” She left the room for only half an hour before she rushed back in, a letter in her hands.

“It’s from mama,” she said, her face bright with happiness. “I did not want to disturb you, but I cannot keep the good news to myself.”

“Did you read it?” Elizabeth sat in the bed, her eyes blurry from sleep, her hair disheveled. “What did she say?”

“Yes, I read it.” Jane’s earlier pain had melted away from her face, replaced by a bright smile. “She said that Papa is finally showing improvements in his health and getting stronger each day.” Jane hugged the letter to her chest. “She believes they will be able to come home in three to four weeks.”

Elizabeth pulled her sister into her arms. The headache she had felt all day no longer plagued her. “That is the most wonderful news!”

The letter was a sign that things were looking up and they would finally experience joy in their lives again. The Stapleton twins would soon eat their words. As would all those in Hertfordshire who could not refrain from gossiping about their family.

That night, Elizabeth dreamed of Mr. Darcy again. They were taking a stroll on the grounds of Netherfield, laughing and leaning into each other as lovers would. When she awoke, she still felt the traces of joy she had felt in the dream, but also the sinking feeling that came with knowing that her dream would never come to pass. He was her employer, and she had no right even dreaming about him.

Chapter 12

Elizabeth gazed out of the carriage window to see Mr. Darcy standing at the window of the drawing room, the light behind him making his hair glow. Moments after she saw him, he disappeared.

As the carriage lurched forward to take Elizabeth back home after a day of hard work, she closed her eyes and tried to calm her breathing. It had been three days since she dreamed of Mr. Darcy again, and something inside her had changed. Now every time she was in his presence, she felt both uneasy and exhilarated. And her mind betrayed her by thinking of him constantly, analyzing every word he said and every single thing he did for her. She found it quite hard to harness the thoughts. Mr. Darcy might have picked up on her discomfort because he was acting strangely himself and always found an excuse not to be in the same room with her.

Elizabeth fell into a short sleep and only opened her eyes when the carriage driver notified her that they had arrived. She thanked him, opened the door, and allowed the night to wrap itself around her body like a cloak.

She was still quite flustered when she entered the house. Jane, Kitty, and Mary rushed to meet her just as she was removing her boots. Jane was in tears and the other sisters' faces were pale. She had never seen them look so distressed before.

Elizabeth's heart jumped to her throat. Something terrible had happened. She was sure of it.

"I have such awful news, Lizzie." Jane clutched her sister's arm. "Such terrible, terrible news."

Elizabeth's lips parted but no words came out. She was afraid to ask what the matter was. She looked at each of her sisters in turn then mastered up the courage. "Is it, Papa? Has he—"

"Not Papa. We did not receive any more news from Manchester." Jane pulled Elizabeth into their bedroom to be out of earshot of Mrs. Robins, their other sisters tagging along.

"Then what in the world is the matter? Do tell me, Jane. What terrible thing has happened?" Her heart clenched as she looked at each of her sisters with dawning realization. "Where is Lydia?"

“It’s her we’re concerned about,” Jane said.

Elizabeth dropped onto her bed and clutched her arms to her chest. “What happened to her?”

“She’s gone,” Mary blurted out, taking a seat next to Elizabeth. “She ran away again.”

“She has taken off with Mr. Wickham,” Kitty added.

Elizabeth blinked several times, unable to believe her ears. “What do you mean she has left with Mr. Wickham?” Her biggest fear had been that Lydia might try to run off again, especially since she kept threatening to, but she could not believe it had actually happened. How could she be so foolish as to run away with Mr. Wickham?

Jane placed a hand on Lizzie’s. “Mr. Wickham came to call on Lydia shortly after dinner, asking to speak to her. After the talk, Lydia announced that they were running off to get married.”

“Eloping?” Elizabeth’s mouth fell open. Her hands clutched at the blanket she sat on. “They’re on their way to Gretna Green?”

Jane sighed. “Apparently, Mr. Wickham insisted that if she loved him, she would marry him right away or lose him forever.”

“And she went with him?” Elizabeth leaned forward, her mind racing with unanswered questions.

Mary nodded. “She wouldn’t let us persuade her not to.”

“What do we do?” Jane asked as though Elizabeth held all the answers to their problems, but she felt just as shocked and helpless as they all did. She did know that if they were to stop Lydia from marrying a man who might end up breaking her heart, they had to act fast.

“We must get her back before it’s too late.” She shot to her feet, her legs trembling. “We can only hope he has not already ruined her.”

Jane inhaled sharply. “I do not see what we can do, Lizzie. How can we bring her back home when we do not even have a carriage at our disposal?”

“I know what I must do. I will return to Netherfield to ask for Mr. Darcy’s help.”

“This late?” Worry tainted Jane’s voice.

“I do not feel we have a choice. The sooner we act, the better chance we may have to get to Lydia before it’s too late.”

Before anyone could talk her out of it, Elizabeth put her coat back on and rushed out of the house. She had no choice but to walk all the way back to Netherfield in the dark.

Every step of the way, she was terrified of the unknown horrors of the night, but her fears of what could happen to Lydia trumped all others.

By the time she arrived at Netherfield, she was barely able to stand from exhaustion, with sweat and tears clinging to her cheeks. Before

she knocked on the door, she wiped away the tears and pushed back her shoulders. She would not let Mr. Darcy think she was weak.

Sam, the valet, opened the door and observed her with curiosity. “Miss Bennet? You have returned?” He peered past her shoulders into the night.

“I have.” Elizabeth smoothed back her flyaway hairs. “I wish to speak to Mr. Darcy, please.”

“He’s already retired for the evening, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, I suspected as much.” She shifted from one foot to the other. “But this is a matter of urgency. Please, Sam, do wake him.”

Sam twirled his dark moustache for a while as though deep in thought. Then he blinked once. “Very well. Come in.”

Elizabeth entered the house, but she remained in the hallway while Sam went to fetch Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy showed up only a few minutes later, looking refreshed as though he had not been asleep at all. Perhaps he had been reading.

“Miss Bennet,” he said. “What brings you here at this time of night? Is something the matter?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I apologize for the disturbance, but something terrible has happened and I do not know...” her grief quickly stole her words, but she promptly pulled herself together. “I was hoping to have a word with you.”

“Of course.” Mr. Darcy glanced at Sam, then back at Elizabeth. “You’re not here to tell me you no longer want your position, are you?”

“Not at all.” Elizabeth shook her head. “I am here because my sister, Lydia, has run off with Mr. Wickham. They plan to elope.”

“That cannot be true,” Mr. Darcy said through clenched teeth. “Tell me everything.”

Elizabeth already knew from overhearing the other servants speak that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham had grown up together, that the late Mr. Darcy had treated him like a son. She also heard that he and Mr. Darcy were on bad terms after Mr. Wickham had gambled away some of his inheritance and Mr. Darcy refused to give him more money.

The two men’s history did not concern Elizabeth. All she wanted was for Mr. Wickham to stay away from her sister and she hoped Mr. Darcy would be able to help her.

In a few words, she told Mr. Darcy everything that had happened while he listened intently. By the time she was done, his face was puce with anger.

“What has possessed Mr. Wickham to do such a foolish thing?”

“I wish I knew.” Elizabeth clasped her trembling hands. “Mr. Darcy, I feel terrible for troubling you at this hour, but I had nowhere else to go. I’m not sure who else to turn to.”

“You did the right thing coming here,” Mr. Darcy said. “I shall handle this.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said, blinking back tears. “You do not know how grateful I am for this.”

“You need not thank me. Mr. Wickham is a relative of mine, which means that this matter concerns me as much as it does you.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I and Mrs. Fletcher will be on our way immediately. Should I fail at persuading your sister into returning, perhaps a woman would have more luck. But it’s best you stay the night at Netherfield, Miss Bennet. It is quite late already.”

“I appreciate your offer,” Elizabeth said. “But it’s best I return to my sisters to be with them during this difficult time.”

“I fully understand. I shall arrange for a carriage to take you home.”

Elizabeth thanked Mr. Darcy again, her heart beating faster when his hand brushed against hers as he offered her comfort.

Not long after, Mr. Darcy and Mrs. Fletcher entered a carriage separate from the one Elizabeth got into.

A few minutes before midnight, Elizabeth arrived home to find her sisters sitting in the parlor, awaiting her return. She had made the right decision to come back instead of spending the night at Netherfield.

“What did you find out?” Jane asked, rushing to Elizabeth’s side.

“Mr. Darcy will handle it. He has already started the search for Lydia and Mr. Wickham.”

“Thank God.” Jane clasped her hands under her chin.

“But what if he gets to them too late?” Mary asked. “What if Mr. Wickham has already ruined her?”

“We shall not think of that,” Elizabeth said in a firm voice. “Not unless we know for sure.”

“I agree,” Jane said. “I guess we have no choice but to wait. It’s quite late now. It’s best we go to bed.”

The sisters went to their rooms, but as Elizabeth lay in her own bed, staring up at the ceiling, she knew that she would not be able to fall asleep. She spent the time praying for Lydia’s safe return home.

From time to time she heard the sound of Jane shifting in her own bed.

“Are you unable to sleep?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Jane said with a deep sigh. “I’m awfully worried about Lydia.”

“So am I.” Elizabeth pinched the bridge of her nose. “Too much has happened, Jane. We need to do something.”

“About Lydia? I though you said Mr. Darcy will take care of it.”

“I’m speaking of our current situation. It’s time we find out exactly

what's going on in Manchester. Mama and Papa are needed here."

"What do you suggest we do?"

"If I had a choice, I would go there immediately. We can barely afford the costs of transportation, but I believe it is of great importance that one of us goes. And I have to work. Would you go, Jane?"

"Are you sure you will be able to handle our unruly sisters on your own?"

"I would have no choice."

"Say no more," Jane said. "I shall go and see for myself that Papa is recovering.

"Thank you, Jane." Hearing Jane say the words comforted Elizabeth so much that she was soon able to find sleep. It was troubled, but it was sleep nonetheless. She needed all her strength to handle whatever fate threw upon them next.

Chapter 13

When Elizabeth awoke and Mr. Darcy had not returned Lydia to them, her stomach twisted with dread. She feared that Mr. Darcy had failed in finding their sister.

She considered not going to work. She very much wished to stay buried underneath her blankets, avoiding the unwelcome truths the new day might bring. She decided, however, that doing nothing would only drive her mad. It would also be unkind of her to neglect her duties, especially after Mr. Darcy had gone to all the trouble to try and find Lydia. Even if he might have failed, he tried.

Still weighed down by grief, Elizabeth did what was expected of her. She dressed and went to Netherfield Park.

Upon her arrival, she went searching for Mr. Darcy, but before she could find him, she ran into Emily in one of the corridors. She was carrying a load of folded laundry. Elizabeth offered her friend a hasty greeting, and before she could ask about Mr. Darcy's whereabouts, Emily took a step closer.

"Might the sad look on your face have anything to do with your sister's disappearance?" Emily's gentle face split into a grin. "If that's the case, you shall be relieved to know that she's safe."

Elizabeth took hold of Emily's shoulders. "What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Mr. Darcy arrived not too long ago with a young girl. I happened to overhear a conversation between him and Mrs. Fletcher. He mentioned that your sister had run away and they were glad to have found her." Emily lowered her voice. "Your sister is having breakfast with Mr. Darcy right this minute."

"He has found her?" Elizabeth swallowed the sob that had been lingering in her throat. "Mr. Darcy has found Lydia?"

"He has indeed. You'll find them in the dining room." Emily's face grew serious. "You need not worry about me breathing a word to anyone. I consider you a friend even if we no longer work side by side."

Elizabeth smiled. "Thank you, Emily." She believed that Emily would keep her word, but would Mrs. Fletcher? Since she disliked

Elizabeth, she might use this as an opportunity to humiliate her and her family. Although Elizabeth was worried about the gossip, she was much more relieved about her sister's return. She gave Emily a quick embrace, then rushed to the dining room, wondering why Mr. Darcy had not taken Lydia straight home.

Inside the dining room, Mr. Darcy and Lydia were seated at the table enjoying their breakfast, while the other servants fussed around them.

Ignoring the curious looks on their faces, Elizabeth crossed the room and pulled her sister into her arms. "You silly girl," she chided Lydia as she squeezed her tight. "Why would you do such a thing? Why would you worry us so?"

Lydia pulled back and Elizabeth's arms dropped to her sides.

"I apologize for my actions," Lydia said, then glanced briefly at Mr. Darcy. "I was not thinking straight." Her eyes showed no remorse whatsoever.

Elizabeth guessed that Mr. Darcy had urged Lydia to apologize as her words did not sound sincere.

"No, Lydia." Elizabeth's nails dug into her palms. "You were not thinking at all." She turned to Mr. Darcy with a warm smile. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I shall never forget this."

"You have no need to thank me. I'm just glad that I got to your sister in time, before any more harm could be done."

"I'm glad to hear no harm was done." Elizabeth shot Lydia a look then returned her gaze back to Mr. Darcy. "May I know where Mr. Wickham is?" She was determined to give the man a piece of her mind.

Lydia sank back into her seat and scowled at her food.

"You need not worry about him." Mr. Darcy took a drink of his tea. "You must have a seat. Join us for breakfast."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I appreciate the invitation, but I must start work right away. I'm sure Mrs. Fletcher is wondering where I am."

Mr. Darcy dabbed his lips with a napkin. "I have already spoken to Mrs. Fletcher. She understands that you might need to calm yourself after everything that has happened."

Elizabeth's lips parted with surprise. "She said that?"

"She certainly did. She was very understanding, and she encouraged the idea of you spending some time with your sister before you start work."

Elizabeth found it hard to believe that Mrs. Fletcher would show such kindness toward her. Perhaps Mr. Darcy had insisted, and she had no choice.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to catch my breath. Thank you, Mr.

Darcy." As Elizabeth sat down, she felt uncertain. She had become accustomed to her new role as a servant, and sitting at the same table as the master of the house was very much frowned upon. She now understood how the other servants must feel. Mr. Darcy had never treated her like a servant, except on the day that they had argued.

When the other servants served her meal, she avoided eye contact with them, too ashamed to be offered special treatment.

She glanced instead at Lydia, who continued to stare at her food. It was obvious that she was disappointed about having her plans thwarted.

"Where is Mr. Wickham?" Elizabeth asked Mr. Darcy again.

"He ran off to London. He was too ashamed to return."

"I hope he never does," Elizabeth said, her fingers curling into fists. "After what he has done, I wish to never lay eyes on him again." Elizabeth instantly remembered the pain she had felt upon hearing that Lydia had run off with him.

"Do not speak of him that way, Lizzie," Lydia scolded, but her gaze was still focused on her breakfast.

As Elizabeth watched her sister, her chest tightened even more. How could Lydia still be in love with Mr. Wickham after what he did?

Elizabeth decided to bite her tongue. She would not scold her sister in front of Mr. Darcy. There would be enough time for them to have a serious talk later.

"Will you not eat, Miss Bennet?" Mr. Darcy asked Elizabeth, raising a single eyebrow. When Elizabeth met his eyes, her pulse skittered, but she refused to allow his effect on her to show.

"I'm afraid, I'm not at all hungry." Elizabeth took a breath. "I hate to waste this delicious food, but I would very much like to start my work immediately, if you do not mind. And since Lydia is here, perhaps she could help me with my work today."

"I shall not," Lydia murmured. "I shall not work as a maid."

"You shall and that is that." Elizabeth did her best to keep her voice down. "It would be an opportunity for you to repay Mr. Darcy for his kindness."

"That's not necessary," Mr. Darcy said. "I was glad to do it. And if you do not mind, I would much rather you both return home to rest. I imagine that neither of you got much sleep last night."

"Mr. Darcy, I cannot accept that. You have done enough. I could not possibly neglect my duties."

"You may, with my permission. I insist." He said the words in a tone of voice that made it hard for Elizabeth to argue. Truth be told, she was quite tired from all the worries that had tormented her.

"Thank you, sir," she said, nodding lightly. "I shall return to work again tomorrow."

“You are very welcome.” Mr. Darcy rose to his feet. “I shall arrange for a carriage.”

“That’s quite all right,” Elizabeth said quickly. “Lydia and I don’t mind walking. It’s a rather pleasant morning.”

“Are you sure about that?” Mr. Darcy asked. “And what if I insist yet again?”

“I shall still kindly reject your offer.” As Elizabeth spoke, she felt Lydia’s rueful gaze on her face. She was clearly against walking home from Netherfield, but Elizabeth thought it was time to teach her sister a lesson.

After Mr. Darcy eventually gave in, Lydia and Elizabeth made their way back home on foot.

For some time, they walked side-by-side without saying a word to one another. Finally, Elizabeth was unable to hold back.

“Lydia,” she said, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear, “I *do* forgive you for what you did, and I’m grateful that you are safe, but this cannot happen again.”

“Lizzie, I apologized because Mr. Darcy begged me to, but that does not in any way mean my feelings for Mr. Wickham have changed. He will soon return, and we shall be married whether you approve or not.”

Elizabeth stopped walking and turned to Lydia. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am.” Lydia dropped her gaze to her feet. “What happened this morning is only a delay. I will be his wife eventually.” She raised her gaze to look into Elizabeth’s eyes with a determination Elizabeth had never seen before.

Elizabeth pulled in a ragged breath. If the Bennets did not allow Lydia and Mr. Wickham to marry, the couple would probably run away again together to finish what they started.

“Very well.” Elizabeth dropped her hands to her sides.

It would do her no good to deny the feelings that Lydia held for Mr. Wickham, even if Elizabeth had lost every shred of respect for him. “If you decide to still marry him, you shall wait for Mama and Papa to return home. Mr. Wickham should be a gentleman and ask for Papa’s blessing instead of running off with you without permission. Your wedding will be the first Bennet wedding and it should be celebrated in the proper way.”

“You accept my decision to marry Mr. Wickham?” Lydia’s eyes lit up. “Do we have your blessing?”

“You give me no choice.” Elizabeth’s nostrils flared. “All I ask is for you to think before you do anything that might taint your reputation and embarrass the family. If Papa hears of it, he would not be able to survive it.”

As soon as the words left Elizabeth's lips, she saw Lydia's face fall.

"You will not tell him what happened, will you?" she asked, sounding like the child she still was.

"If we do not tell him, someone else will. The servants at Netherfield already know about it."

"He will be so upset." Lydia started to walk again. "It was not my intention to hurt anyone. I only wish to be happy, to be with the man I love. You all made it clear from the start that you did not approve of our union because of all the rumors about him." Lydia turned to Elizabeth. "But I can assure you, Lizzie, that he gave me his promise to never look at another woman again when I am his wife."

"For your sake, I hope he keeps his word."

When Elizabeth and Lydia reached the house, the other Bennet sisters were also relieved and excited about Lydia's return. Instead of reprimanding her any more, Elizabeth decided they should do something fun for the day, so they made sandwiches and had lunch in the garden.

In the evening, Jane packed a few of her belongings and prepared to leave in the morning, headed for Manchester. Lydia's return did not change their plans to find out the truth about their father's health.

Before bed, Elizabeth confided in Mrs. Robins about the situation with Lydia, and her worries that her sister might run off again while she was working at Netherfield.

"With Jane leaving for Manchester tomorrow, I would be unable to keep an eye on her."

"Then I shall do so," Mrs. Robins said. "With your permission I shall keep an eye on all of them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Robins. That would be most appreciated."

"There's no need for you to thank me, Miss Bennet. I am very fond of you and your sisters." The older woman beamed at her.

"And we are very fond of you." With that, Elizabeth wished Mrs. Robins a good night and went to bed, sleeping more soundly than she had done in quite a while.

As soon as the sun brightened up the sky, Jane left for Manchester, promising Elizabeth that she would write as soon as she arrived.

Chapter 14

Two weeks after Jane left, Mary shook Elizabeth awake, waving a letter at her.

"It's addressed to you," she said, breathless with excitement. "It came yesterday."

As usual, when Elizabeth arrived home the previous night, her sisters were already asleep, and she hated to disturb them.

"Who is it from?" She sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"It's Jane's handwriting." Mary placed the envelope in Elizabeth's lap.

"Yes, it is." Elizabeth's heart leapt with joy as she grabbed the letter and ripped it open.

As she started to read, she prayed that the letter held pleasant news pertaining to their father's health.

My dear Lizzie,

I would like to apologize for not having written sooner. I can only imagine how worried you are about Papa's condition. This letter is meant to relieve you. When I arrived in Manchester, I was disappointed to find that his health had not improved as Mama had written in her letter, but a lot has happened since I arrived.

I'm glad to inform you that a kindly doctor who specializes in the heart has taken an interest in Papa's medical case. The moment he started treating Papa, we started to see improvements. Papa is finally on the road to recovery. The doctor has assured us that there is no more cause for concern.

We shall return to Longbourn as soon as the doctor gives Papa permission to travel, perhaps in two or three weeks. For now, I do hope you're well and that Lydia has not run off again with Mr. Wickham. I have not said a word to Mama or Papa as I would like to spare them the pain.

My dear sister, I have to leave you now, but I do hope next time I write, it would be to tell you exactly when we will be back in Longbourn. For now, take care of yourself and do not allow our silly sisters to overwhelm you too much.

Mama and Papa both send their love and look forward to seeing you

all again soon.

With love,

Jane

ELIZABETH FOLDED UP THE LETTER, beaming from ear to ear.

"What did the letter say?" Kitty asked. She had entered the room while Elizabeth was reading the letter. Lydia stayed away as usual. She had been upset lately that Mr. Wickham had not yet returned to assure her of his love.

"Jane has shared with us some pleasant news," Elizabeth said. "Very pleasant news indeed."

"When will they all return home?" Mary asked.

"Not for a few weeks yet, but the good news is that Papa's health is improving."

"A few more weeks?" Mary pouted. "Did she say how long exactly?"

"I'm afraid she could not say yet." Elizabeth hugged the letter to herself. "But it will be as soon as the doctor gives Papa the permission to travel. Unless that happens, he will have to remain in Manchester."

Despite the good news Elizabeth had just told them, she saw the disappointment on her sisters' faces. No matter, though. To her, life was improving, and she couldn't be happier.

"There's no need to look so grim." She squeezed Mary's hand affectionately. "Overall, it is good news. The most important thing is that Papa is recovering. Do you not think we should be grateful to hear that?"

"I suppose you're right." Mary sank next to her on the bed. "We should be grateful."

"Well, then, I should be on my way to Netherfield." Elizabeth swung her legs out of bed. "Thank you for waking me, Mary. If you had not, I would have overslept." Elizabeth handed Jane's letter to Mary so they could read it for themselves. Then she proceeded to get dressed.

"Will you not have breakfast?" Mrs. Robins asked as Elizabeth was about to walk out of the house.

"I don't have time, I'm afraid. The carriage will be here quite soon." She smiled at the woman who had lately come to treat them like her own grandchildren. "I wish you a pleasant day."

"Thank you." Mrs. Robins patted Elizabeth's hand. "Do not worry about Lydia. I'll continue to keep a watchful eye on her and the others."

"I know you will. We appreciate you so very much." Elizabeth gave Mrs. Robins a small wave and stepped out the door just as the carriage was arriving.

When she arrived at Netherfield, there was not much for her and Mrs. Fletcher to do so she offered to assist Emily with the laundry instead. Mrs. Fletcher did not have any objections to it. Since the day she and Mr. Darcy brought Lydia back, she had been much kinder to Elizabeth. She still refrained from smiling, but she now treated Elizabeth with respect.

When Elizabeth mentioned Mrs. Fletcher's change in behavior to Emily, her friend told her, "I suppose she understood the pain you had felt that day. She has a daughter who ran away with a man she did not approve of. She never saw her daughter again."

"Goodness." Elizabeth placed a hand on her chest. "What happened to the daughter?"

"She died in childbirth." Emily rubbed soap into the clothes.

"How terrible for her to lose her daughter without having seen her again." Elizabeth now understood why Mrs. Fletcher was so bitter. She carried a heavy weight inside her heart.

"Yes," Emily said. "Now let us speak of something more pleasant, shall we?"

Elizabeth smiled at Emily. "Your expression tells me you have something to share with me. Am I right?"

She was overjoyed to work with her friend again and even more so when Emily told her she was in love with a man she recently met at a dance.

"I'm so pleased for you, Emily. I wish you all the happiness in the world."

"I know you are. You have always been so kind to me. I'm glad to have met you."

"The feeling is mutual." Emily had such a gentle heart that Elizabeth couldn't help but be happy for her.

The two women continued to do the washing while laughing at each other's jokes, which made the work much easier to bear.

"Have you any idea where Mr. Darcy is?" Elizabeth asked casually as they were hanging the clothes up to dry. She had not seen Mr. Darcy for two days. Whenever he was around, she always happened upon him at least once.

"All I know is that he is out of town for business, but I have no idea where he has gone. According to Mrs. Fletcher, he will be away for several days."

Elizabeth felt her heart sink. Since the day Mr. Darcy had brought Lydia back home, the persistent thoughts she had been having about him had increased. And when she was asleep, he always managed to sneak into her dreams.

"Why do you ask?" Emily turned to Elizabeth with a raised eyebrow.

“No reason.” Elizabeth averted her gaze. “I was curious, that’s all.”

“Is that so?” Elizabeth felt Emily’s eyes on her. “Do you fancy him?”

Elizabeth threw Emily a shocked glance. “Oh, Emily, that is just absurd. What would make you think that way?”

Emily shrugged, then waved a dismissive hand. “No reason. Just a feeling. Forgive me if I’ve gotten it wrong.”

“No need to apologize.” Elizabeth’s heart thudded as she forced herself to appear unfazed by Emily’s suspicions. “We better finish up here.”

She could no longer deny that every time she saw Mr. Darcy at Netherfield, her heart beat a little faster. But after working for him as a maid, he would never look at her as a potential match. What man of high birth would choose a maid for a wife? It was best that she not even consider the possibility.

After the washing was done, lunch was served, then Elizabeth helped Mrs. Fletcher complete a few chores. After that there was not much else to be done, so she left Netherfield earlier than she normally did and arrived at the Longbourn house shortly after supper. To her surprise, she found Charlotte Lucas at the house.

“What a treat,” she said, embracing her friend. They had not seen each other for quite a while and so much had happened since then.

“I have missed you, Lizzie. How have you been?”

“As well as can be expected.” Elizabeth sat next to Charlotte in the drawing room.

“Is it true that you’re working as—”

“It’s certainly true,” Elizabeth admitted with confidence. “I do hope you’re not ashamed to have me as a friend.”

“Of course not. I shall never be ashamed of you. The only reason I have not come to visit was because I visited my cousin again in Scotland.” A corner of Charlotte’s mouth lifted. “I have actually come to share some news with you. While in Scotland, I might have met my future husband.”

“Charlotte, that is such great news.” Elizabeth held her friend’s hand. “Tell me everything.”

She listened as Charlotte told her about the man she hoped would soon become her husband. He was a widower who lost his wife to a mysterious illness.

“Does he have children?” Elizabeth leaned back in her seat. She was relieved that their conversation was focused on Charlotte rather than her own situation.

“He has a charming little girl.” Charlotte sighed. “I would have preferred to be the first woman to give my husband children, but Matthew is such a wonderful man. And he has a great fortune to

match."

"Well then, if your heart tells you he is the one, I see no reason why you should not pursue your desire. I pray he will make you an offer soon."

"You have always been such a romantic at heart, Lizzie," Charlotte gave Elizabeth a radiant look. "I wish that one day you will also find a man who offers you the happiness you deserve."

"That is my hope as well." Elizabeth smiled. "We can only wait and see what the future holds."

Charlotte's expression stilled and grew serious. "Lizzie, you need to know that I respect you for what you are doing during these trying times. Choosing to work as a maid in order to support your family is commendable. Your future husband will be a very lucky man to have a wife such as yourself."

Charlotte's words touched Elizabeth so deeply that she drew her into an embrace. "I appreciate your kind words."

Charlotte was the one to break the embrace. "I also came with news that I hope will cheer you up."

"Is that so?" Elizabeth straightened. "In that case, I look forward to hearing the news."

"Well, my father recently received news that the man who robbed your father and others of their fortunes has been captured."

"Is that true?" Elizabeth's mouth fell open.

"It is." Charlotte beamed. "But that's not all. Apparently, the fortune he had accumulated has also been seized."

Elizabeth placed a hand on her chest. "What does that mean?"

"From what my father said, your father and a few others who had lost massive fortunes to this man might be able to recover some, if not all of it."

Elizabeth was so surprised by the news that she was not able to speak for quite some time. "I do not know what to say," she whispered finally. "You mean to say that my father has not lost everything after all?" The news would mean so much to Mr. Bennet. Perhaps it would even help speed up his recovery.

"I would like to believe so." Charlotte got to her feet and smoothed down her skirt. "I would like to stay longer, my friend, but my mother is expecting me. I'll be sure to call on you again in a few days." Charlotte kissed Elizabeth on both cheeks. "I pray the rumors are true and your situation will improve quite soon."

"I very much look forward to seeing you again, Charlotte. Thank you for bringing me hope."

After Charlotte left the house, Elizabeth shared the good news with her sisters. They were just as overjoyed as she was; even Lydia's mood lifted. Charlotte's visit had done them all some good.

When Elizabeth went to bed that night, she thought about Charlotte. She truly cherished their friendship. She only wished Lady Lucas had been as good of a friend to Mrs. Bennet. She knew for certain that she had not accompanied Charlotte to Scotland.

Some of the maids at Netherfield mentioned that they had seen her in Meryton on more than one occasion. And yet, she had not once come to inquire about the Bennet sisters' wellbeing during their mother's absence.

She guessed that Lady Lucas was still upset that Mr. Bingley had shown interest in Jane instead of Charlotte.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and decided not to worry herself any longer. She would instead focus on the good news she had received.

She had never dared to dream that her father would recover his fortune. But even so, she would not give up her position at Netherfield just yet, not until she was certain. Or perhaps she only wished to remain in Mr. Darcy's presence for longer.

Chapter 15

The Bennet sisters' Saturday supper was disturbed by a commotion outside the house. It was the sound of a carriage approaching.

Elizabeth pushed her chair back and rose to her feet, so did her sisters.

"Could it be?" Elizabeth asked no one in particular as she rushed out of the dining room and darted to the front door.

The moment she threw open the door, her face broke into a smile and her hands flew to her trembling lips.

"Papa." She rushed forward as a footman helped Mr. Bennet out of the carriage. Jane and Mrs. Bennet also emerged.

Elizabeth had long stopped wondering when they would return in order to avoid disappointed hopes. It had been exactly three weeks since Jane left to join Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in Manchester.

Overcome with tears of joy, the Bennet family embraced, happy to be reunited at last.

Inside the house, Elizabeth turned to her father, nearly bursting with joy. "Papa, you look well."

"I feel well, my girl." Mr. Bennet placed a warm hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "But it will certainly take some time for me to recover my strength."

"But the worst is over," Mrs. Bennet said. "If it weren't for Doctor Morton being so kind as to take on your father's case, Mr. Bennet would probably not be here with us."

"You shall tell us everything, but first we must sit." Elizabeth ushered them all into the drawing room, where Mr. Bennet could sit in his favorite armchair.

"What about your case interested the kind doctor?" Elizabeth asked after they had all settled down.

"I could not say," Mrs. Bennet said, but when Elizabeth looked at her father, she noticed there was something he was withholding from them.

"Papa?" she asked, fixing him with a knowing look.

Mr. Bennet threw his hands in the air. "I had promised to keep it to

myself, but I think it's important to acknowledge the man who is responsible for my being here; the man who sought out Doctor Morton, one of the best heart doctors in the country."

"And which man might that be, Mr. Bennet?" Mrs. Bennet folded her hands in her lap. "I was of the impression that Doctor Morton discovered your illness after hearing about it from Doctor Booth. They are friends, are they not?"

"Being in the same profession, they knew of each other, to be sure, but they were not friends. A different man was responsible for contacting Doctor Morton." Mr. Bennet's smile warmed Elizabeth's heart. It had been a while since she saw it.

"Papa, what do you mean." Jane tilted her head to the side. "What secret are you keeping from us?"

"The gentleman behind all of this had requested that I not share the news about his good deeds, but I'm so very grateful for his kindness that I cannot keep it to myself—not now that I have returned home to my family."

Mrs. Bennet tossed her hands up in the air. "Mr. Bennet, do not keep us in suspense. Who is this gentleman you speak of?"

"Very well," Mr. Bennet settled back in his chair. "The gentleman is Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy himself."

"Mr. Darcy?" Everyone in the room seemed to say at the same time.

"Yes. It was he who sought out and hired Doctor Morton to treat me." Mr. Bennet shifted in his seat. "When Mr. Darcy came to see me, I was just as surprised as all of you are at this moment."

"He came to see you?" Mrs. Bennet asked. "I had no idea he...when?"

"You were otherwise occupied, Mrs. Bennet. It was quite a while ago."

"But why?" Jane asked, but her eyes were on Elizabeth's face, which had lost all color.

"Yes," Elizabeth breathed. "Why would he go to all the trouble? He barely knows us."

"I cannot say," Mr. Bennet said. "And I found it rather odd that he did not expect anything in return."

"I cannot believe it." Elizabeth stared at her hands as she remembered everything Mr. Darcy had done for her in the past few weeks. He had given her a job, rescued Lydia from Mr. Wickham, and now this. Why would he help her father?

She was unsure what to make of it all. She wondered whether he did the good deeds for her benefit, but that could not possibly be. Apart from showing her kindness, he had not made her feel in any way that he held any affections toward her.

“Lizzie, do you by any chance know of his motivations?” Jane asked suddenly. “He *is* your employer after all.” As soon as Jane said the words, her face blanched and her hand flew to her lips. Elizabeth had requested that she not mention to their parents that she was a servant at Netherfield, but it had slipped out. Lizzie would not hold it against her.

“What in the world do you mean by that?” Mrs. Bennet asked. “Elizabeth is not employed by—”

“Mother,” Elizabeth said quickly. “What Jane says is true. Mr. Darcy has been staying at Netherfield and he has employed me as one of his—”

“Elizabeth is a maid at Netherfield,” Lydia said before Elizabeth could explain. “She started not long after you left for Manchester.”

“That is just absurd.” Mrs. Bennet’s hand flew to her chest. “Lizzie, tell me it’s not true.”

“It is true,” Elizabeth admitted. “I had wanted to gather experience so I would be better prepared in case our financial state worsened.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Bennet’s sharp voice sliced through the space between them. “Our situation is not so dire that a child of mine should work as a maid.”

“I do not mind, mother. In fact, I have come to enjoy it.”

“And it was Mr. Darcy who gave you the position?” Mr. Bennet rubbed his brow. “How often do you have to work?”

“Each and every day,” Kitty cut in, lowering herself into one of the seats. “Lizzie is a hard worker, Papa. She leaves early and often returns home after we have already gone to bed.”

Mrs. Bennet shot to her feet and went to the window, her body swaying slightly as she walked. After a sharp inhale, she whirled around to face Elizabeth. “I do understand that you are trying to be of assistance, but Lizzie, you shall resign your position immediately.”

“I will do no such thing. Not unless I am certain that we are financially secure. I do not feel ashamed for taking a job.”

“Mrs. Bennet, do not be so hard on the girl,” Mr. Bennet said, moving forward in his chair. His eyes were fixed on Elizabeth’s face. Unlike Mrs. Bennet, he looked rather proud of his daughter. “I applaud Lizzie for having the courage to be a responsible daughter while we were away.”

“We were also responsible,” Kitty said.

“Mr. Bennet, do you not understand what this will do to Lizzie’s reputation? What man of good standing would be willing to take a wife who has worked as a servant?”

“A man who will love and respect Lizzie for being brave in a difficult situation.” Mr. Bennet sighed, rubbing his forehead. “After everything Mr. Darcy has done for me, for us, I am glad Lizzie was

able to repay him in some way."

"By being his servant? No, it is not acceptable." Mrs. Bennet planted her hands on her hips. "What else has changed since I have been away?" She narrowed her eyes at Elizabeth.

"Mrs. Robins is the only house help we have left," Elizabeth said cautiously. "The other maids have quit their positions."

"And you did not hire anyone else?" Mrs. Bennet's hand went to her throat as though she found it hard to breathe. Then she sank into the nearest sofa. "I cannot believe this," she whispered, tilting her chin upward. "We shall hire more servants at once. Dear God, what would Lady Lucas think? I had asked her to call on you girls. She must have been shocked to discover that we hardly have any maids left in our household."

"No, mother," Elizabeth replied. "You need not concern yourself with that. Lady Lucas never visited us."

Mrs. Bennet was silent for a long time, her mouth working as though she were speaking, but no words left her lips. She soon pulled herself together and patted her hair. "Good," she said. "It's best she never came. I would not like her to see our household in this state."

"I believe it's best we stop wondering about what others would think and focus on Papa. We should be grateful that he has returned home in good health." Elizabeth took a few steps toward her father and looked down at him with tears in her eyes. "We're glad to have you back, Papa."

"Not as glad as I am to be home with my girls." He rubbed his chin. "Now that we are all here together, perhaps I can lift your spirits some more."

Mrs. Bennet shot him a look. "Mr. Bennet, surely you have not been keeping yet another secret from me?"

"I had wanted to share the news with all of you at once. I have recently been informed that the con artist has been captured and there is a good chance we might be able to recover most of our fortune. I do not know exactly how much at this point."

"Oh, Mr. Bennet!" Mrs. Bennet clapped her hands. "That is the most wonderful news!"

"I was certain you would be glad to hear it." He chuckled, his laughter deep and warm. "But now, I should retire for the night. I have had too much excitement for one day."

"That is a good idea, Papa." Elizabeth went to help him to his feet. "You should get all the rest you need to recover fully."

After Mr. Bennet went to bed, Mrs. Bennet pulled Elizabeth aside and looked at her sternly. "Promise me you will give up your position tomorrow. I forbid you from working as a servant."

Now that things were possibly looking up for them, Elizabeth saw

no need to continue working and torturing her mother in the process. “All right, Mama. I promise.” She smiled. “I am so glad to have you home.” She was glad that her parents had returned, especially for Lydia’s sake. She saw no need to upset them by telling them that Lydia had run away. She had promised Lydia that she would not say a thing unless she stepped out of line again.

“It’s quite lovely to be back with you girls.” Mrs. Bennet pulled Elizabeth into an embrace. “I have missed you.”

Elizabeth was not accustomed to her mother’s unexpected embraces, which made her uncomfortable at first. But soon, she wrapped her own arms around her mother and pulled her close.

Chapter 16

As soon as Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield, she asked to have a word with Mr. Darcy. The footman took her to the library, where she found him reading the paper and drinking tea.

He rose and offered her a seat, but she chose to remain standing.

"I do not intend on disturbing you for long," she said.

"Do you have something on your mind you wish to speak to me about?" Mr. Darcy asked, his eyes slightly narrowed.

"I do. It's important."

"Very well." Mr. Darcy lowered himself back into his seat. "I'm all ears."

Elizabeth cleared her throat. "Mr. Darcy, I know what you have been keeping from me."

"I do not understand what you mean." His brows drew together.

"My father returned to Longbourn yesterday fully recovered from his illness." Elizabeth clasped her hands behind her back. "He revealed to us that you hired the doctor that treated him."

After a moment of silence, Mr. Darcy blew out a breath and wrapped his hands around his knees. "Well, I should have known it would not remain a secret for long."

"I do not understand why it should be. Do you not wish to be thanked for your kindness? If it weren't for you, he might never have recovered."

"But he has, and that's all that matters."

"I am so grateful to you, Mr. Darcy. I do not know how to thank you."

"It was my pleasure, Miss Bennet." His face split into a smile that snatched Elizabeth's breath. "You should not feel you owe me anything in return. I merely saw a man who needed help, and since I was in the position to offer it, I did."

Elizabeth nodded, her heart filled with so much gratitude she could barely contain it. But she also felt a tinge of disappointment. Deep inside she had secretly hoped he had come to her father's assistance for her benefit, but she was wrong to think he might harbor any romantic feelings for her. He was only a kind man who did a good

deed, and she was nothing but a maid.

"We shall never forget what you have done for us," she continued.

"It pleases me to hear that your father is well. That is thanks enough for me." He picked up his paper and placed it on his leg. "But I would like to thank you for the work you have been doing here. I have been hearing only praise from Mrs. Fletcher."

"I am glad to hear that." Elizabeth drew in a deep breath. "Mr. Darcy, another reason I had wished to speak to you is to inform you that I cannot continue working here."

Mr. Darcy nodded. "I understand, and I fully respect your decision to give up your position."

"You do not look surprised," she said, confusion clouding her mind.

"Of course not. I was well aware that this day would come."

"Do you mean to say you're not upset that I am leaving my position at such short notice?"

"Not at all. Miss Bennet, we both know that this is not a job for a lady."

"I appreciate that you still consider me to be a lady after I worked as a maid."

"The fact that you took a job to help your family only makes you more of a lady."

"I appreciate you saying that." Elizabeth waited for him to say more. When he didn't, and the silence became intolerable, she glanced at the open door. "I suppose I should take my leave."

"Of course." Mr. Darcy opened his paper. "I wish you well, Miss Bennet. Should you need anything else, do not hesitate to let me know."

"You have done more than enough for me and my family. We shall have no further causes to be indebted to you." Elizabeth took a step toward the door.

"How about making you one last offer? An invitation perhaps?"

"I do not understand." She turned to face Mr. Darcy with a questioning expression. "What sort of invitation do you speak of?"

"An invitation to another ball." He pushed the paper aside again and got to his feet.

"At Netherfield?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. Since the Pemberley manor, my home, has finally been restored to its former state, I shall not remain master of Netherfield for much longer. Mr. Bingley is due to return any day, and I shall return to Pemberley soon after his arrival."

"I see." Elizabeth had completely forgotten that he was not staying at Netherfield indefinitely. "And you will be hosting a farewell ball?"

Mr. Darcy gazed out the window upon the gardens. "I am, and it

would be an honor if you and your family could attend."

"We would be honored to attend." Elizabeth had never been fond of balls, but after everything they had experienced, a celebration would be very much welcome. "My sisters will be thrilled to attend a ball again."

"So will you, I hope." Mr. Darcy went to open the door wider. "I look forward to seeing all of you there. I shall send an official invitation." He paused. "I hope you do not mind me ending our conversation. I'm afraid I have some business to attend to."

"Of course not, sir. Please go."

"Goodbye, Miss Bennet. I look forward to seeing you at the ball." Mr. Darcy stepped out of the room, leaving Elizabeth to wonder whether he cared for her after all.

She shook her head, clearing it of any romantic notions. Then she went to say goodbye to Emily and the other workers, who were all surprisingly sad to see her go. They all waved as she climbed into the carriage and headed home.

Back at the Longbourn house, she told her family about the ball and as she had expected, they were delighted.

As soon as the excitement died down, Mr. Bennet informed them all that he had more good news.

"It is true," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "We shall receive at least half of what Martin Harris stole from us."

"What about the rest?" Mrs. Bennet asked. "Is it all gone?"

"I'm afraid so." Mr. Bennet wiped his brow with his handkerchief. "But we should be glad to be getting anything back at all. There are other families who are not as fortunate as we are."

"I fully agree," Elizabeth said. "It could have been so much worse."

The Bennet sisters were all overjoyed, and they took turns embracing their father.

The past year had been challenging, but Elizabeth was glad that things would soon return to normal. The ball that Mr. Darcy had invited them to would be the perfect opportunity for all of them to celebrate their new beginning.

"Lizzie and Jane," Mrs. Bennet called. "I would like you to go to Meryton at once to purchase dresses for the ball. You will need to make a good impression. Hopefully you will each walk away with a potential match."

Elizabeth and Jane simply smiled because they knew they could not argue with their mother this time.

"And what about us?" Lydia crossed her arms. "Do we not deserve new clothing? We wish to look our best as well."

Elizabeth knew Mrs. Bennet had singled both she and Jane out simply because they were older. She also wished for Elizabeth to be

seen again as a lady rather than a maid. For the first time since accepting Mr. Darcy's invitation, she wondered how uncomfortable it would be for her to be served by the people she had worked with.

"Of course, you should buy new dresses," Mr. Bennet cut in. "Everybody deserves a treat. We have all weathered the storm and now it is time to celebrate."

Not long after Mr. Bennet said the words, the girls left the house and spent the entire afternoon in Meryton, as well as most of the next day until they found dresses they were pleased with.

~

THREE DAYS after Elizabeth gave up her position at Netherfield, Lady Lucas called on them. When Elizabeth returned from her morning walk, she found her sitting with Mrs. Bennet in the parlor.

When Lady Lucas saw Elizabeth enter, she put down her cup and rose from her chair. "Darling Lizzie, I heard about what you endured. How terrible of you to have to work as a maid." She pulled Elizabeth into an embrace that did nothing to warm her heart. It saddened her that Lady Lucas only chose to be Mrs. Bennet's friend during pleasant times. As Mrs. Bennet looked on, however, she did not seem to mind at all.

"Do not feel sorry for me, Lady Lucas. It was quite an interesting experience actually. Nothing terrible at all about it." It was a struggle for Elizabeth to keep her voice from sounding harsh.

"I find that hard to believe," Lady Lucas said. "You need not pretend, Lizzie. It must have been quite painful to work side-by-side with people who should have been serving you."

"I do not regret my decision in any way. If I had to do it again, I would."

Elizabeth now appreciated having had the opportunity to experience the life of a servant. It gave her so much more respect for the people who served them every day. All too often, servants were treated as though they were not people with emotions of their own.

"You are so much braver than many of us will ever be." Lady Lucas clutched her pearls. "Everyone is talking about it. You should hear the terrible things that are being said about you. Terrible, terrible things."

Elizabeth lifted her chin and forced a smile. "What they say about me is none of my concern. I choose to ignore it all."

"And it's only a matter of time before it all blows over," Mrs. Bennet said. "Soon people will move on to other subjects. I am sure as soon as Lizzie finds herself a husband, no one would speak of it any longer."

"I do hope it will not be too hard for you, Lizzie." Lady Lucas sat

back down. “My Charlotte has never worked as a servant, and yet it took her quite a while to find the perfect match.”

“It was lovely to see you again, Lady Lucas.” Elizabeth put on a smile, ignoring what she had said. “I should leave you and Mama to catch up.”

She walked out of the parlor, her teeth clenched. Moments later, she burst into the bedroom, where she found Jane, staring down at a letter.

“Good news, I hope.” Elizabeth lowered herself onto her bed. She needed to erase the unpleasant emotions she had felt in the presence of Lady Lucas. The lady was nothing more than a traitor. She only wished her mother were able to see it.

“The letter is from Mr. Bingley. It simply says he looks forward to seeing me at the Netherfield ball.” Jane raised her eyes to meet Elizabeth’s.

“That is good news, do you not think? How do you feel about seeing him again?”

“I’m rather nervous.” Jane folded up the note. “I do not understand his intentions. He stayed away for so long that I have come to the conclusion that his feelings for me were only my imagination.”

“Jane, I’m certain he had his reasons, and you shall receive your answers at the ball.”

“Let us hope he has some very good reasons.” Jane slipped the note underneath her pillow, then smiled at Elizabeth. “And I do hope Mr. Darcy will be brave enough to open his heart to you as well. I truly believe he feels more for you than you would think.”

“Jane, after speaking to him at Netherfield, I doubt he feels anything more than charitable toward me. In fact, I believe he has done everything out of pity.”

“I refuse to believe that.” Jane went to sit on Elizabeth’s bed. “No man would go to such lengths to please a woman unless he has ulterior motives. And it must mean something that he invited you to the ball. Perhaps he plans to reveal his true intentions to you.”

Elizabeth said nothing, but secretly she hoped Jane was right. As much as she wished to deny it, Mr. Darcy had touched her heart in a way she could never have dreamed. To be truthful, she missed working at Netherfield where she was able to see him often.

From a young age, Elizabeth had promised herself that she would marry a gracious gentleman who made her heart skip a beat. Mr. Darcy fit that description perfectly. But if Jane was right, why had he not taken the opportunity to express his true intentions before now?

Whatever the case may be, she would never reveal her feelings unless she was certain her affections would be returned.

Chapter 17

On the day of the ball, as soon as the Bennet girls, accompanied by their mother, exited the carriage, Mr. Wickham appeared out of nowhere. Elizabeth had no idea that he would be coming to the ball. From the look of surprise on Lydia's face, neither did she.

He glanced briefly at Lydia, then went to plant himself in front of Mrs. Bennet.

"Mrs. Bennet," he said, breathless. "I would like to apologize for my behavior."

"And what behavior are you referring to?" Mrs. Bennet asked, perplexed.

"I should not have asked Lydia to elope with me. I—"

"Lydia tried to elope?" Mrs. Bennet shot Elizabeth a scathing look. "Why was I not informed of this?"

"It did not happen in the end, Mama. That's the most important thing," Elizabeth said, her eyes on Lydia's pale face. "Lydia returned home."

"Lydia?" Mrs. Bennet struggled to keep her voice from trembling as she turned to her younger daughter. "What were you thinking? And why did I not know about this?"

"I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea you were not told." Mr. Wickham took a step back, shamefaced.

"No, young man, I was kept in the dark." Mrs. Bennet's tone was edged with steel.

"We did not want to worry you," Jane added.

"Worry me?" Mrs. Bennet fumed. "I deserve to know everything that goes on under my roof. I am disappointed in you girls. I went away for only a few short weeks, but it was enough for you to drag this family's reputation through the mud."

Elizabeth touched her mother's arm. "The main thing is that Lydia had the sense not to go through with it."

"Exactly, Mama," Lydia said. "Even if Mr. Darcy had not stopped us, I would probably have come to my senses. I wish for a proper wedding with my family present."

"Mr. Darcy had something to do with this?" Mrs. Bennet asked in

surprise.

Mr. Wickham who had been silent while Mrs. Bennet reprimanded her daughters, now spoke up. “Mr. Darcy brought Lydia back home,” he said. “But I fully understand that you’re upset, Mrs. Bennet. And you have every right to be. I’m here to assure you that I care for your daughter. I took such an action because I feared you might not bless our union.”

“You claim to care for my daughter and yet you’ve ruined her.” Mrs. Bennet’s voice shook with every word.

“I can assure you, Mrs. Bennet that I ruined nothing more than her reputation, and for that I am deeply sorry.”

Mrs. Bennet gave a rueful laugh. “That is enough damage.”

Elizabeth took her mother’s hand in hers. “Mother, not many people know. But if we continue this conversation out here, that would no longer be the case.”

“Well,” Mrs. Bennet removed her hand from Elizabeth’s and straightened to her full height. “Mr. Wickham, I suppose I should give you credit for telling me the truth, unlike my daughters who kept everything from me.” As a group of elegantly dressed ladies walked by, Mrs. Bennet pasted a smile on her face. The moment they disappeared into the house, the smile crumbled.

Her gaze returned to Mr. Wickham. “I have heard things about you, Mr. Wickham, unpleasant things, and after what you did, I do not think I can trust you with my daughter.”

“Do not say that, Mama.” Lydia clutched Mrs. Bennet’s arm, but her pleas went ignored.

“Mrs. Bennet, I completely understand your concerns,” Mr. Wickham said, clasping his hands in front of him. “But I can assure you that I am a changed man now.” He looked at Lydia. “I went away because I was ashamed of what I had done, and I have now returned because I wish to repair the damage. During my time away, I realized that Lydia is my perfect match. I would like the opportunity to repair her reputation as best as I can.”

Lydia drew nearer to Mr. Wickham and took his arm. “See, mother, he is a gentleman., and I shall marry him.”

“That is not for you to decide,” Mrs. Bennet said. “He has also not asked for your father’s blessing. I doubt he will get it.”

“Mother, if you refuse us, we shall be forced to elope again.”

“Lydia Bennet, you shall do no such thing.” Mrs. Bennet clutched her chest. “Have you no respect for my nerves? Would you like to drive me to the grave?”

“Mrs. Bennet,” Mr. Wickham said, pulling away from Lydia slightly. “I meant every word I said. I’ve made mistakes in my past. I have hurt people who care for me, but I have made a decision to

change all that, to become a better man. It's all thanks to your daughter."

"Well, I would have to give what you said some thought, as this is a poor moment to have this discussion." Mrs. Bennet peered past Mr. Wickham's shoulder to the house. "Come girls, it's time to go inside."

When they entered the dancing hall, Mr. Bingley approached the Bennets. He greeted them and kissed Jane's hand before asking if he could speak to her.

As though nothing had happened outside, Mrs. Bennet's face transformed, the scowl suddenly replaced with a smile. "Now that is one perfect gentleman. I am positive Mr. Bingley will ask for Jane's hand in marriage before the week is over."

"I hope so," Elizabeth said as she watched them walk away.

"Lizzie, you should make yourself seen. There are quite a few potential suitors in here." Mrs. Bennet looked around her with joy. "But first I would like you to speak to Mr. Darcy. For him to have done all those things for us and to invite you here must mean he has feelings for you."

"Mother, it does not in any way have to mean that. He would have done it for anyone."

"I doubt it." Mrs. Bennet grabbed Elizabeth's arm. "There he is. We should greet him."

Elizabeth followed her mother's gaze and saw Mr. Darcy standing together with two women, one older and one younger. They looked as though they were having an important discussion. "Are you sure we should disturb them?"

"Don't be silly. We are his guests. He invited us." Mrs. Bennet tightened her grip on Elizabeth so she would not escape. "Come on, Lizzie."

As they pushed through the other guests, Elizabeth noticed that Lydia and Mr. Wickham were speaking not too far from where Jane and Mr. Bingley stood. She hoped with all her heart that Lydia would not do anything she would later regret.

"Mr. Darcy, Mr. Darcy." Mrs. Bennet called, beaming. "I would like to thank you for the invitation. This ball is magnificent."

"It is my pleasure," Mr. Darcy said and introduced them to the two women, who were apparently his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter Miss Anne de Bourgh. "I am honored that you could attend." Elizabeth's cheeks warmed when his eyes settled on her face. She was thinking of all the inappropriate dreams she had had about him lately.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh pulled him away, saying she had something important to discuss with him.

"Such terrible behavior for a lady," Mrs. Bennet whispered to

Elizabeth. “If she had not disturbed, Mr. Darcy would have asked you for the first dance.”

“You cannot say for sure, mother. It’s best we not speak of him.”

“A mother has a feeling when something is right. And I have a good feeling about this. You should certainly put your main focus on Mr. Darcy. He is not only wealthy, he also has a good and generous heart.”

“I’m sure there are other men like him here tonight.” Elizabeth scanned the faces around her. “Excuse me, Mama. I need to go speak to a friend.”

Just as the band started to play, Elizabeth moved away from her mother and escaped the hall to search for Emily. She found her at the entrance to the kitchen.

“Miss Bennet,” Emily said, “what a treat to see you here!”

“We’re friends, Emily. It’s time you call me Elizabeth, or Lizzie if you prefer.” Elizabeth squeezed her friend’s hand. “How have you been?”

“Very well, thank you. I am an engaged woman now. I shall be married in a few weeks.”

“Emily I’m so happy for you.” Elizabeth pulled her friend into an embrace. “That is wonderful news.”

“How about you?” Emily pulled away. “I did not expect to see you here.”

“Why do you say that? I had told you before I left that Mr. Darcy invited us.”

“I know.” Emily leaned closer. “But given how you feel about Mr. Darcy, I did not expect you would attend the celebration of his engagement.”

“Engagement?” Elizabeth’s chest tightened. “What do you mean?”

“Have you not heard? Mr. Darcy is engaged to Miss Anne de Bourgh. I overheard them speaking over dinner the other day. This is a celebration of their union.”

“I had no idea.” At hearing Emily’s words, Elizabeth felt as though her heart had been struck by a rock, but she would not allow Emily or anyone else to see her disappointment. Instead, she lifted her chin and put on a smile. “I am happy for him...them. I do not have feelings for Mr. Darcy.”

“There’s no point in denying it, Miss... Lizzie. I saw how you looked at him at Netherfield and how you reacted each time his name was mentioned.”

“Well, whether I feel or do not feel anything for him is no longer relevant.” Elizabeth shook her head. “He is an engaged man and we have no right to even be discussing him.”

She changed the subject back to Emily’s engagement and soon

after returned to the ballroom.

When she laid eyes upon Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh on the dance floor, her mood plummeted even more and she suddenly felt quite ill.

She pulled herself together and managed a dance with a man whose name she could not recall. Then she finally found the courage to tell her mother that she would like to leave the ball early. “I feel unwell.”

“If you miss this opportunity, Elizabeth, it might never return. You need to find a husband. You’re not getting any younger.”

“Thank you for the reminder. I am well aware of that, Mama, but I cannot remain here when I feel unwell. With your permission, I shall take the carriage and send it back for you before the ball is over.”

After a hushed argument with Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth finally left without saying goodbye to Mr. Darcy. She had looked everywhere but was unable to find him. She would send a letter of apology.

On her way back home, it finally dawned on her that her feelings for him were far deeper than she had suspected, and the thought of him marrying another woman sliced through her like a sharp knife. By the time she reached the house, the pain was almost physical.

When Mr. Bennet asked why Elizabeth had returned so soon, she told him the truth, that she was hurting.

“I would have loved to see your mother’s face when you left early.”

“She was quite disappointed, but I felt too ill to stay.”

“Then you shall go to bed right away. Do not worry about your mother. I will do my best to calm the flames of her anger.”

Elizabeth went to her room and as soon as she climbed into bed, tears sprung to her eyes. For the first time in her life she wept because of a man.

Chapter 18

Elizabeth was fast asleep when Mrs. Bennet and her sisters arrived home from the ball. In the morning she awoke with cold symptoms, including a violent headache.

When Jane approached her bed to check on her, Elizabeth blinked up at her sister several times, wishing she could banish the almost blinding pain.

"How are you feeling?" Jane asked, eyes clouded by worry.

"Not very well." Elizabeth placed a hand on her forehead. It felt warm to the touch. "My head feels on the verge of bursting."

"Oh dear. Is there anything I can do to ease your discomfort?"

"All I need is rest. I will be all right before you know it." Elizabeth gritted her teeth to contain the pain and pulled herself to a sitting position. "I would like to hear about you and Mr. Bingley. Did he give you an explanation for his long silence?"

"He did." Jane perched on the edge of the bed and gazed at Elizabeth, her expression joyful. "It was fear that had driven him away."

Elizabeth shook her head lightly. "I do not understand."

"Well, it turns out that Mr. Bingley had once been let down by someone he loved dearly. He had been of the belief that the feelings were mutual and had therefore made the lady an offer."

"And she accepted, I presume." Elizabeth could not raise her weak voice above a whisper.

"She did," Jane said. "But the day before the wedding was to occur, she changed her mind and called off the engagement with no explanation. She left him heartbroken."

"What an awful thing for someone to do."

"I agree. Well, since then he had locked off his heart for quite some time... until he met me." Jane's face lit up. "Mr. Bingley explained that he felt even stronger emotions for me than he had felt for the other woman."

"And it terrified him." Elizabeth massaged her temples. "He thought you would do the same thing to him."

"Yes." Jane twirled a lock of hair around her finger. "Last night, I

assured him I could never do such a thing to him. I feel so much love for him, Lizzie. I no longer care that he disappeared without a word. All that matters to me at present is that he has returned."

Elizabeth smiled, her headache no longer important in light of her sister's happiness. She reached out and squeezed Jane's hand. "I'm happy for you, Jane. I do hope he will ask you to be his wife very soon."

"He already has." Jane let go of Elizabeth's hand and covered her cheeks with her palms. "Mr. Bingley made me an offer last night."

"How grand it feels to wake up to such wonderful news." Elizabeth pulled Jane into her arms and held her for a long time. "I wish you all the happiness and blessings in the world, my dear Jane."

After a while, Jane pulled away and looked into Elizabeth's eyes. "I would be so much happier if you, too, were to find your own happiness."

Elizabeth placed both hands on Jane's face. "You should never base your happiness on mine. Enjoy these precious moments to the fullest."

"I shall try." Jane's expression sobered. "I heard the news about Mr. Darcy, last night. It must have been awful for you to hear he's engaged to another."

Elizabeth decided there was no point in keeping secrets from her sister any longer, as Jane knew her too well. So, she poured out her heart, telling Jane about how her feelings for Mr. Darcy had snuck up on her and how she had wrestled with her heart to no avail. Jane listened without comment.

"Oh, Lizzie," Jane said when she was done. "I cannot even begin to comprehend how awful last night must have been for you."

"I was quite upset to hear about Mr. Darcy's engagement." Tears burned at the backs of Elizabeth's eyes. "But the truth is, he was never mine to start with."

Elizabeth was not one to dwell on things she could not change. The fact that Mr. Darcy was engaged to Anne de Bourgh confirmed to her that he never had any feelings toward her.

"Lizzie Bennet, you are so much stronger than I could ever be. If I were to discover that Mr. Bingley were engaged to another woman, I would not have been able to bear it."

"Let's just be grateful that you never have to experience such disappointment. Do not be upset for me. I choose to focus on the future rather than the past."

Elizabeth was aware that it would take time for her to cease her constant thoughts about Mr. Darcy, about every word he said to her and everything he did for her and her family. But eventually, she would get over whatever it was she had felt for him.

“Enough about me.” Elizabeth pushed thoughts of Mr. Darcy to the back of her mind. “Tell me everything Mr. Bingley said when he asked you to be his wife.”

“There’s nothing I would rather speak of.” Before Jane could launch into the story that made her so very happy, Kitty came into their room to inform Elizabeth that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet wished to have a word with her in Mr. Bennet’s study.

“Did they say what it’s about?” Elizabeth asked.

Kitty simply shrugged and left the room.

“That’s odd,” Elizabeth said when the door closed again. “Papa never calls us to his office unless he wishes to discuss something of a serious nature.”

“That’s true.” Jane got to her feet. “It’s best you go and find out what it’s about. I will tell you everything about Mr. Bingley’s proposal after breakfast.”

After Jane left, Elizabeth got dressed, then went to speak to her parents.

When she opened the door to her father’s study, she came to a halt in the doorway and her heart started to gallop. “Mr. Darcy?”

Mrs. Bennet stood by the window and Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bennet sat in chairs facing each other.

“Good morning, Lizzie. I hope you feel better today,” Mr. Bennet said.

“I… Yes.” She was unable to take her eyes off Mr. Darcy. What brought him to her home?

“Mr. Darcy wants to have a word with you, Lizzie,” Mrs. Bennet said, rushing to her side and pulling her into the room. “Come inside.”

“Good morning, Miss Bennet.” Mr. Darcy rose to his feet. “Would you mind joining me for a short walk on the grounds?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth hesitated for a moment as she glanced at her parents, then she followed Mr. Darcy out of the house.

“Miss Bennet, I apologize for disturbing you this early in the morning,” he said.

“Not at all. Did you call upon us because you happened to be in the area?”

“No. Paying you a visit is something I have planned on doing for some time.” He paused. “I had wished to speak with you last night actually, but you left before I had a chance. I’m sorry you were not feeling well enough to enjoy the ball.”

“I apologize for having left so soon. I hope you do not think me ungrateful.”

“Not at all, Miss Bennet. I’m glad to see you looking well.” Mr. Darcy stopped walking and turned to her. “Another reason I’m here is to share with you something that I have been struggling with for quite

some time."

"What would that be?" Elizabeth forced herself to listen to what he had to say before she jumped to any conclusions.

"I have been wrestling with thoughts of you, Miss Bennet." He ran a hand through his hair. "My struggle began the day you started working at Netherfield."

"Mr. Darcy, what are you saying?" Elizabeth felt her heart soar inside her.

"I'm saying that I'm in love with you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I was quite impressed by all that you decided to do for your family when you fell upon hard times. I could not stop admiring you for your courage, and of course your beauty."

"I do not know what to say." Elizabeth could only manage a whisper. She shook her head. "I had no idea."

"I'm not surprised you did not suspect a thing. I am quite good at hiding my feelings. But I find I am no longer able to do so."

"It's rather too late, wouldn't you say?" As much as Mr. Darcy's words touched Elizabeth deeply and lit up her heart, he was engaged. "You will soon be married to another woman. You celebrated your engagement last night."

Mr. Darcy dropped his gaze. "That is no longer the case." He looked up again to meet Elizabeth's eyes. "My engagement to Miss Anne de Bourgh has been dissolved. I had been unsure of our union from the start. I was pressured into asking her to be my wife, and at the time I thought I was doing the right thing. I cared for her enough, but when I met you, I realized it would be a mistake to settle for something less than the real thing. What I feel for you is real." He swiped the palm of his hand across his forehead to remove a sheen of sweat. "When I heard you left last night, I feared I might never see you again and the thought left me miserable."

"So you called off your engagement?"

He nodded. "It was painful, but also the right thing to do. Whether you accept my offer or not, you will remain the woman who taught me how it feels to truly love. For that I will forever be grateful."

"Why did you wait until last night to end the engagement? You must have hurt her deeply."

"All I can tell you is that I was a coward. I made mistakes." He cleared his throat. "However, I am glad to say that when I ended the engagement, Miss de Bourgh seemed rather relieved. As it turns out, she had been secretly in love with someone she met in London a few months ago. If we had married, both of our hearts would have been with another."

"She confessed all this to you last night?" Elizabeth's fingers fluttered to the base of her throat.

“Yes, after my own confession.” Mr. Darcy reached for Elizabeth’s hand and pressed it to his chest. “Is there something between us? I saw how you looked at me each time we spoke. Sometimes I wondered whether you felt the same way. Please tell me my suspicions were correct.”

“Your suspicions were correct, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth could not help her bright smile. She was stunned that he was standing in front of her, confessing his love. “But I felt you would never fall in love with a woman who worked as a laundry maid or housekeeper.”

He chuckled. “You working as a maid was the thing that made me fall in love with you.” He tightened his fingers around hers for a moment and then slid to his knees. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I need you in my life. Would you make me the happiest man and become my wife?”

“Only if you would make me the happiest woman.” Elizabeth blinked back tears of joy.

“I promise to do just that for the rest of my life.” Relief suffused his features.

“Then yes, Mr. Darcy. I will be your wife.” Elizabeth was barely able to breathe as Mr. Darcy got back to his feet and pulled her into his embrace. In his arms she felt completely at home.

She finally drew away from him. “You should speak to my father, ask for his blessing.”

“I already did. And he couldn’t be happier to have me as his potential son-in-law.”

“That is rather lucky for you. What if I had rejected your proposal?”

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “I like to believe that I can be quite convincing.”

“And charming I must add.” She laughed. “We better go inside. I can already see my mother at the window. I’m sure she’s about to start with the wedding preparations.”

As Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy walked back into the house to inform every one of their good news, she noticed that the headache she had felt upon awaking was completely gone. She was free to celebrate the beginning of her wonderful future together with the man she loved.

Upon hearing Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s news, the entire Bennet family was overjoyed.

Lydia, however, was the exception. She was still hurt by Mrs. Bennet’s rejection of Mr. Wickham.

Mrs. Bennet was unable to hold her tongue after Mr. Darcy left. “I cannot have my daughter marrying a rake. What would people say?”

“Mother,” Elizabeth said. “People tell stories whether or not those stories have merit.” She was too happy to keep anyone from finding

their own happiness. Mr. Wickham was not her first choice for her sister, but she could see how heartsick Lydia was. She clearly loved him very much. “What do you think, Papa?” she asked.

Mr. Bennet turned to Lydia as he lowered himself into a chair. “After what Mr. Wickham tried to do, I would wait a while and give him a chance to prove himself before I make my final decision.” It was the first time he had ever put his foot down about anything. “The man does not even have the decency to come and ask for my blessing.”

At hearing that, Lydia fled the room in a rage.

Elizabeth prayed that Mr. Wickham would not run off with another woman before he had a chance to get into their father’s good graces. She wished for everyone to be as happy as she was.

As soon as the discussion about Lydia and Mr. Wickham ended, Elizabeth, Jane, and their mother sat down to discuss the wedding preparations. Both agreed that they would like to marry on the very same day.

Not long after Mr. Darcy proposed to Elizabeth, the wedding license was issued and there was nothing more standing between Elizabeth and her future with Mr. Darcy.

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ELIZABETH AND JANE both married the men of their dreams on a beautiful sunny day. The celebrations took place at both Netherfield and Pemberley over two days. The vows had been exchanged the day before and now the attendees sat around a long table at Pemberley, enjoying an extravagant dinner.

Elizabeth sighed with contentment as she took in the happy faces of her family. Mrs. Bennett laughed out loud at something Mr. Bennet said to her while they enjoyed their game and fish courses. Mr. Bennet looked happier than he had several weeks ago. Now that he was back on his feet, he was able to fully enjoy the wedding day of both his daughters.

“Are you happy enough, Mrs. Darcy?” Mr. Darcy whispered to Elizabeth, “or is there anything I can do to add to your joy?”

“You have already done plenty.” She reached for his hand, heat radiating through her chest. “I have never been happier, Mr. Darcy, and not only for the two of us.”

Wrapping her fingers around her husband’s, Elizabeth met Jane’s eyes from across the table. The sisters smiled at each other. They had been through so much, but at the end of it, they had each found their own happiness.

Even Lydia was happy. After Mr. Wickham made no attempt to prove his love for her following the ball at Netherfield, she had finally

decided that he was not for her after all. She had no other recourse but to let him go, and she had already set her sights on someone new.

After dinner, Elizabeth went to thank the staff, especially Mrs. Fletcher, who had asked to accompany Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth to Pemberley.

"I am grateful for all the work you did to create a wonderful evening for all of us."

"It was my pleasure, Mrs. Darcy. It's the least I could do after all the trouble I gave you." She blinked away tears. "I was unkind to you. I should have seen from the start what a good woman you are."

"Let's no longer focus on the past, Mrs. Fletcher." Elizabeth gave the woman a warm smile, then returned to her husband.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy ended the beautiful day with a stroll, holding hands as they walked in the newly manicured gardens of Pemberley while talking about the future that lay ahead of them. Elizabeth would forever be grateful to Mr. Darcy for giving her the position at Netherfield that enabled them to get to know each other.

THE END

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